

3rd Sunday of Easter (C)
(Acts 5:27-32.40-41 / John 21:1-19)
04.05.2025
The Church

Today's Gospel passage aptly gives us three images of the Church which may help us to reflect on what the Church is called to be at this time when the cardinals are going to elect a new Pope.

The first image is that of the boat. The 3rd century theologian St Hippolytus of Rome wrote: "The sea is the world; the Church, like a ship, is rocked by the currents, but not submerged: in fact it has an expert pilot, Christ." (*De Antichristo* 59)

19 centuries later this image is still very relevant and evocative, it has been chosen as the logo of the 2025 Jubilee Year and you may be able to see it on the paschal candle which is just beside me. The Church is a boat which is not supposed to be moored in a port. Jesus' call addressed to the Church today is the same as that which he addressed to St Peter 2000 years ago: "Launch out into the deep, and throw the net out" (Lk 2:4). With Christ at the helm, we are not a crew at rest. In 2019, Pope Francis invited us to "fight apathy (...), to build the future, to work for a better world. (...) Do not be bystanders in life. Get involved! Jesus was not a bystander. (...) Fight for the common good, serve the poor, be protagonists of the revolution of charity and service." (*Christus Vivit*, n. 174)

The second image is the net full of fish. This is another image for the Church whose mission is to welcome the whole of humanity, all men and women. The 4th century St Cyril of Jerusalem exhorted his people with the following words: "You have come within the Church's net: (...) flee not: for Jesus is angling for you." (*Prologue to the Catechetical Lectures*, n. 5) As long as we sail on the seas of this world, the Church is not a select club or a small sectarian group of pure and like-minded people. No, all kinds of fish, a huge number, must be able to find their place in the net until the end of time when the Lord will judge us justly and mercifully.

While the net in the episode that we heard this morning is not broken, we have to acknowledge that the present reality of those who claim to be Christians is that of a broken net. Moreover, at the moment, in all Churches, there are people whose words and actions threaten the net of our communion. For our part, we have to be very careful not to allow ideological opinions and fears to tear us apart. Like the disciples (cf. Mt 4:21) we have to mend the net of the Church, the net of relationships within the Catholic Church and between the Churches. As Pope Francis reminded us, our unity must be "stronger than dispersive forces or the dragging on of old oppositions" (*Address*, 15.10.2022).

The last image is that of the breakfast prepared by Jesus for the disciples. This meal clearly prefigures the Eucharist which makes the Church. But that is not all, the truth is that in the same way as St Augustine invited the faithful of Hippo who were coming for communion to become what they were receiving, we are supposed to become nourishment for everyone with whom we interact. The whole Church, we should be bread, broken and given generously to nourish the lives of those we encounter. Before becoming Pope Francis, Cardinal Bergoglio declared: "The vocation of each one of us is to be the bread shared for the life of the world, after the example of Jesus. (...) We are transformed into a sacrament. We are a sacrament for humanity." (*Catechesis*, Quebec, 18.06.2008)

All of us who are baptised are enrolled to sail in the boat of the Church, to sail on unchartered seas and oceans; like the net, we have to be open to all, “endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3); and we should never forget that the Eucharist “is handed down and received” not for an individualistic salvation but “for the life of the world” (*Id.*).

The dialogue which concludes today’s Scripture reading is the key to understanding properly what the Church is, its meaning and its mission.

The 2nd Vatican Council states clearly, in the Church, “the first and most necessary gift is love, by which we love God above all things and our neighbour because of God.” (*LG* n. 42). For his part, St Augustine believed that “all the divine precepts are referred back to love, (...) every commandment harks back to love.” (*Enchiridion* 32:121)

St Thérèse of Lisieux believed that the Church “must have a heart burning with love.” (quoted in *CCC* n. 826) We have the responsibility to kindle that fire of love in our communities and in the society in which we live. This love is the force which will allow the boat of the Church to sail everywhere securely and to proclaim boldly the Good News and this love will allow the net of our unity to remain unbroken.

It is not enough to reduce our Christian faith to Sunday worship and law-abiding behaviour. As Pope Francis reminded us: “Faith calls for journey, a ‘going out’ from ourselves, and it can work wonders (...), if we leave our safe harbours and our cosy nests. Faith increases by giving, and grows by taking risks.” (*Homily*, 13.10.2019)

The first risk we must take is the risk of love, love of the poor, the migrants, those who live on the margins of our society, those who struggle with mental health problems or their sexual orientation.

Allow me to conclude by quoting again the 2nd Vatican Council: “It is the love of God and the love of one’s neighbour which points out the true disciple of Christ.” (*LG* n. 42)

Let us pray for the one who will be elected as Pope, for all the baptised, for one another, that we may be true disciples of Christ, that we may allow love to have primacy in our lives, in all our decisions. May love never be superseded by anyone or any anything because, as St John of the Cross wrote: “At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.”