

Sunday Homily

PENTECOST

23 MAY 2021

YEAR B

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”

John 16:13

Illustration

They say that football is almost a religion these days. It certainly has its dedicated followers, vast numbers of them. And there is an almost cathedral-like atmosphere in a huge stadium on the day of a big match. The impression becomes clearer still when the crowd sings “Abide with me”. Supporters identify strongly with “their” team, willing them on to glory with a fervour that puts some church congregations to shame.

On the pitch, the eleven players work as a team, putting into practice all the moves their coach has taught them. They have learned the rules of the game and, on the whole, they follow them; if only because they know the game will descend into chaos otherwise! And one person has the responsibility of ensuring that the rules are indeed followed, interpreted correctly in any given situation on the pitch, so that gifted players can produce a game worthy of them. That person is the referee.

Gospel Teaching

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is preparing his team, his first eleven and the rest of the squad, for the game of their lives. The scene is the Last Supper, after Jesus has washed his disciples’ feet. Judas has already set off to betray him, so Jesus is left with eleven of “the Twelve”, and with those others whom John calls “the disciples”, the wider group of Jesus’ followers, men and women.

Although Jesus has trained his squad, coached them for the important fixture that lies ahead, although he has encouraged their talents and their dedication, he will not be with them on the pitch. His job is almost done. But he promises to send them a referee. He promises to send someone who will help them interpret what he has been teaching them, in any situation in which they might find themselves. Jesus is returning to the Father, but he will send the Spirit of truth to guide his followers.

At Pentecost, the Spirit descended upon all the disciples, just as Jesus had promised. In the vivid scene from Acts, Peter uses Joel’s prophecy to make sense of what he has seen: men and women, suddenly inspired to communicate with

people of all nations, to tell the world about God's mighty intervention in the destiny of human beings, through Jesus Christ. "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy," God had promised through Joel. Prophecy is not the foretelling of the future, but the interpretation of God's word in the present, for the present.

Referees are not always popular. Players do not always agree with their decisions. And in the world today, people still resist the Spirit. For the Spirit is not always a comfortable companion. He comes to jolt us out of our complacency, to challenge the world, to search our hearts. Most of all, he comes to point us once more to Jesus, to glorify him and remind us of his teaching.

Application

The Spirit is still moving in the Church today as the Gospel is interpreted for a third millennium. We are faced with many new situations, undreamed of in first-century Palestine: economic, social and ethical. There are dilemmas today for which no easy answers can be found in our study of scripture. We all know of arguments in which the Bible is cited by both sides, with equal conviction. We need continually to ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our worship, in church meetings and in our daily lives. We need to cast aside our prejudices and presuppositions and listen to the Spirit of truth, who reminds us of the teachings of Jesus and encourages us to apply them.

Like the referee interpreting the rules of the game in specific situations, the Spirit will show us how those commandments of Jesus can be applied: love God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself. A good referee allows a game to flow, stepping in only when there is conflict, and reminding players of the rules. In that way, he encourages them to use to the full the skills their coach has taught them, which in turn brings credit to the coach. If we listen to the Spirit, we can bring credit to our Teacher. We can testify on Jesus' behalf, and play the game he would want us to play.