

Sunday Homily

PENTECOST

5 JUNE 2022

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“He will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth.”

John 14:16-17

Illustration

Some years ago, a party of British tourists was on a trip to the Holy Land. On the day they visited Bethlehem they found it strangely quiet. All the shops were shut, even the ones selling olive-wood cribs. Clearly trouble was expected. Before long, the tourists found themselves in the middle of what was clearly a demonstration of some kind. A large group of women was marching through the streets, waving placards and shouting. The tourists were curious – and a bit scared. But the placards and the shouts were in Arabic. Then one woman detached herself from the march, and came over to the tourists. In her hand was a photograph. Ignoring the men in the group, she addressed the women. She spoke no English, and they spoke no Arabic, yet they understood her. The women were the mothers, sisters, wives and daughters of men imprisoned by the occupying Israelis, demanding to know the whereabouts of their menfolk. Communication had happened across the barriers of language, race, culture and religion; communication that was mother to mother, sister to sister, human spirit to human spirit.

Gospel Teaching

The Bible readings at Pentecost focus on matters of communication. The Old Testament reading is the story of the Tower of Babel. The people of earth decide not to obey the intention of the creator that they should scatter far and wide and populate the earth. Rather, they will make a name for themselves by gathering together to build a tall tower, which in its size and magnificence will rival the work of the creator himself. But their attempts are thwarted. After a while, they find they can no longer communicate with one another. Cooperation becomes impossible, and the building project is left unfinished. This ancient story explains the variety of languages in the world, but it does much more; it tells us about the fundamental human need for communication, if collaboration between us is to be possible.

Acts' story of Pentecost tells of a temporary reversal of these communication difficulties. The first noticeable effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit is that Peter and the other apostles are able to communicate their Gospel message across the language barriers. Spirit speaks to spirit, God's people understand one another, because the Spirit is in them.

Talking about the presence of God is very difficult, because our words are always inadequate. Believers down the ages and across the religions have struggled to describe their experience of God. The Old Testament writers understood the difficulty. When they write of God's right arm winning the victory, or of his breath bringing the dead to life, or of his glory settling on Jerusalem, or of his name dwelling in the Temple, they are trying to find words to express the inexpressible – the sense of the intimate presence of God among them. Those who are aware of God have a sense of God out there, beyond them – and yet also a sense of God very near, so near as to be almost a part of them. Christians use the language of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit to express this, while still recognising that anything we say about God is always going to be inadequate to express the truth of his being and his presence in the world.

Today's Gospel reading represents a stage along the way of the Church's development of the doctrine of the Trinity. But its basic message is clear enough. Jesus' departure from the world does not mean that God is no longer present with his followers. He will send "another Advocate", "the Spirit of truth", who will be with them and in them. They will experience the intimate presence of God still, no longer external to them but in their very beings. They will be held together as a community of believers, despite the opposition that will inevitably come, by the Spirit they share.

Application

The Church tends to be no better at communication than the rest of humanity. We are quicker to judge than to listen, quicker to condemn than to understand. The challenge of Pentecost is the recognition that God's Spirit lives in all of us. If we want to find God, we must look not only outwards, to the world he created, but inwards, into our own hearts. And we must also look into the eyes of our fellow believers, and see God there. We belong together because of the Spirit we share. If we allow spirit to speak to spirit, real communication can happen and, beyond all the Church's factions, understanding may flourish.