

6th Sunday of Eastertide

If you ever wanted to sum up the life of the Church, the readings today do it for us.

In the second reading we have our goal. This is heaven, the City of God, as it is described. Over the centuries people have tried to describe it and this description is as good as any that human language can come up with. A place built out of the most precious things we can imagine, filled with the light of God.

The gospel takes us back to the Last Supper where Jesus is telling us what he has put in place for us on our journey to the heavenly city. In a wonderful way he says, 'the Father and I will come and make our home with you.' That is something we should reflect on all the time. Every time we come to Holy Communion we should think of ourselves sitting down to share a meal with the Father and the Son. Think of the closeness and intimacy that Jesus is showing us. That is how he wants our relationship with God to be. Not one of fear but of friends together at a table.

To help us achieve that we have the Spirit of God, of the Trinity, with us who is there for us at any time both bringing us peace if we rely on the Spirit in our lives, and enabling us to trust in those words of Jesus about our lives: 'Do not be afraid.' He is telling us to be positive, joyful, active followers of his who can always trust in the guidance of the Spirit, our advocate, or, to use older language, our Paraclete.

But then comes our first reading. I love this part of the Acts of the Apostles because it could be written about today. The setting is Antioch which had become such an important place for the early Church. It was a big cosmopolitan city in those days. One of the most important in the eastern empire. Here the Christians flourished and gained many new converts and from here the faith spread across the Mediterranean. But there is a problem. What is this new Christianity to look like? How is it to be lived? Is it with the traditions of Judaism from which it has recently sprung, or is it to be something very different, and as St. Paul would say, free of the Jewish Law? The Antioch church has gone down St. Paul's route but people have come from Jerusalem to tell them they have gone wrong. How do they decide? What has been cut out of the reading today is the account of the big Council in Jerusalem to which everyone sends delegates in order to find a resolution. The Church in Antioch waits for the response.

Think of our Church today. There are great debates going on across the world in Catholic communities as to what is essential to being a Catholic. In our modern way they have become entangled with the battles within society as well. In the politics of major countries such as America, where so many of the Catholics of today live. But across Europe and all the world as well. What is essential? How do we resolve our debates about the Mass, about how we live our personal lives, how we love and express that love? What ways of life if any exclude people from practicing as Catholics? What actions, particularly with regard to those of

our lives that govern relationships and our bodies, can be accepted or not. Across the world, but also again dominating the politics of America, is the question of abortion and the battle lines drawn up that seem to get ever more violent.

There has also grown up across society a distrust of anyone who has a role to do with governance or expertise. Perhaps this began with politics, but it has affected all the professions. And it has affected the Church as well. So the problem arises for us as a Church is: 'If we do not trust those whose positions we used to respect, who do we trust?'

The early Church knew that they could turn to the Apostles in Jerusalem for help. Decades ago, because we believe that whenever a Pope is elected the decision is a search for the right person guided by the Holy Spirit, then we could automatically turn to the Pope, to Rome, for advice, for guidance. Do we now?

I believe that we have to still have faith in this process just as the early Church did. We may disagree on various things that come out of the Vatican, but if we lose faith in our tradition of how the Holy Spirit helps us gather and come together as the people of God, and around whom we come together, then we lose faith in what it is to be a universal Church, literally a Catholic Church.

There has to be something that holds us together, and though the role has changed over the centuries in certain ways, and some of the people holding the post in the past have not always been seemingly the best role-models, it is the Pope, in his role as Pope, that holds us together. Once we fall away from this we will lose the universality of the Church.

That is why the current Pope has tried to engage us in the Synod process, which indeed worked better in some places than others. (And you can see our response on the diocesan website.) To bring the Church together in an old way but using new methods. Not just travelling from Antioch to Jerusalem, but bringing as many opinions to Rome as possible using the technology of today.

In this engagement he is encouraging us to be involved in all sorts of ways in the Church and our local church as well. In fact to help him. But also to take this locally as well and express the spirit of the idea of Synod in practical ways too, and what will inevitably become necessary in our part of the world, to run parishes in different ways too. New ways.

As a small part of this I have put a Novena to the Holy Spirit for us to pray in the nine days running up to Pentecost in two week's time. And around Pentecost will ask you what you think you might be able to offer to the parish as well, bearing in mind that so many already contribute a great deal.

You might well have ideas to offer. But do offer those ideas you are ready to organise or help do so.

In due course there might just be one priest covering a large part of south Cumbria (it is not coming just yet!), and as the Bishop said two week's ago, we have to be able to continue the Mission of the Church whether or not there are priests to hand.