

Fourth Sunday of Easter

In today's First Reading Peter tells the Jewish crowd: 'Of all the names in the world given to men, the name of Jesus is the only one by which we can be saved'(Acts 4:12). In this reflection I would like to ponder what Peter might mean. He seems to be echoing words Jesus spoke to Thomas during the last supper: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'(John 14:6). Some Christians down the centuries, and still today, have understood these words to mean that only those who consciously know Jesus and call upon him and believe in him can be saved. The problem with such an interpretation is that it would place salvation and so God's love outside the grasp of millions.

Yet we listen to Paul's words to Timothy: 'God wills everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'(1Timothy 2:4; see Titus 2:11; Romans 5:18). And we hear Jesus say: 'When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself'(John 12:32). Jesus' heart is the heart of God. In today's Gospel, having spoken of his love for his sheep, he declares: 'There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd'(John 10:16).

Two thousand years later we find ourselves living in a world when people from all cultures have found in Jesus what their hearts have been looking for and have embraced him and the revelation of God that he is. We also find millions of people, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and many others, including some who think of themselves as atheists, who live beautiful lives, following their hearts and looking to God as they have been taught about him, but who have not really been exposed to Christianity, or have been exposed to it in a way that does not touch their hearts. Is the Risen Jesus really drawing them to himself and so revealing God to them? Could they be being drawn to the Father through him. Since 'salvation' is, as Jesus said 'living and living to the full'(see John 10:10), surely salvation cannot be restricted to those who have explicit faith in Jesus and join the Church of his disciples.

Jesus' disciples experienced him as the perfect human expression of God's Word (God's Word-made-flesh). God's 'Word' is God's self-communication, something that has been going on everywhere since the beginning of time. God communicates with all his creatures, through nature, through people and events. God is present at the heart of everything. Religion is our response. The problem is that our response is necessarily imperfect. This was true of Judaism. Jesus' disciples experienced Jesus as correcting, perfecting and fulfilling their religion. Whatever they had previously believed to be true but that did not fit with what they experienced in Jesus, they had to leave behind in order to embrace what Jesus revealed about the God he called 'Father'.

Peter is saying that if we want to live to the full we must listen to God's 'Word' that is perfectly revealed in Jesus. Each person can listen only from within his or her culture. When we hear God's call into divine communion we will have to leave behind much of our ego and the desires that clutter and distract our heart, but we will bring to our response everything that is beautiful in the religion and family into which we have been born and nurtured. Our belief is that anyone who responds to God's Word is, in fact, responding to the Risen Jesus who, through the gift of his Spirit, is drawing everyone to God.

You will recall Jesus' parable about the final judgment. The king in the story welcomes all those who cared for him when he was hungry and thirsty and in prison. Many will be surprised for they didn't realise that they were caring for the King. He will tell them that whenever they cared for the least of his brothers or sisters they were caring for him. Whenever a Muslim teenager, a Jewish grandfather, a Hindu newly-married reaches out in genuine love to anyone, they are responding to the drawing of Jesus' Spirit. Of course it would be wonderful if they knew that that is what they were doing. Hence the privilege and obligation of those in the Christian community to share the Gospel and to be the heart and face of Jesus in the world. For everyone is seeking the true God, and the true God is incarnate in Jesus, God's 'Word' made flesh. People's response to God's self-revelation is, in fact, a response to Jesus, even though they may not know that that is what they are doing.

We cannot come to the Father unless we welcome God's Word. God's Word has been coming into the world since the beginning. Creation itself is a manifestation of God, a word from God, to those with ears to hear and eyes to see. The prophets of Israel were continually speaking God's word to the people, and every culture has had its prophets – those who are sensitive to God speaking to them through nature and history and the events of their lives and who give voice to God's word in word, or art, or dance, or song, and especially in the way they live their lives in love. The beauty of Jesus is that he is God's perfect word, free of all confusion and imperfection. He is God's focal word, bringing together all that God has said and focusing it on love.

If we know Jesus and reject him, of course we are rejecting salvation, for we are rejecting God's Word, we are rejecting God's offer of love, we are choosing not to be part of God's flock. Those who have never heard of Jesus cannot be accused of rejecting him. Nor can those who have been presented with and have rejected a false Jesus. If these have welcomed God's word in whatever way they have heard it and have responded in love, these are those of whom Jesus spoke when he described the last judgment. He will reach out to them in welcome for he was hungry and they gave him to eat. When they say that they do not know him, he will say with a smile. Oh, yes, you did, even though you did not know me by name, for whenever you gave anyone to eat you gave it to me.

Pope John-Paul II returned to this topic again and again in his encyclical on the Mission of the Redeemer (1980): 'The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. But it is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation.'

The Pope goes on to quote from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [GS, 1965] from the Vatican Council: 'Linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, the Christian will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from

hope. All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all people, and since the ultimate vocation of every person is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.'

This does not lessen the importance of the mission given by Jesus to his disciples (see Paul VI EN§80). Mary of Magdala was a Jew and had heard God's word often, but it made all the difference when she met Jesus. It is hard without Jesus to hear God's word clearly amid the static of this cluttered and confused world. As we tell others of Jesus – better as we show them Jesus' love – we must always be respectful of the ways in which God is already speaking to them in their lives. This is an area where many serious mistakes have been made by Christians over the centuries, when force has been used to bring about conversion, and where missionaries have been insensitive to the values of other cultures. However today there is no excuse. Listen to the words of the Second Vatican Council: 'The effect of the Church's mission is that whatever good is found sown in people's minds and hearts or in the rites and customs of peoples, these are not only preserved from destruction, but are purified, elevated and perfected for the glory of God'(LG, 1964, §17).

We are privileged to have heard Jesus' voice and to have come to know him, the Good Shepherd. As we listen to his desire to call all his straying sheep into the flock, let us remember that we are to be the heart of Jesus in the world. We are to be the face of Jesus in the world. Let us take our part in the mission which he gave to his disciples, by making this community a place of love and by going out to welcome into it those who long to hear his voice and who would love to enjoy the communion with him in love which it is our privilege to know.