

## 28th Sunday of the Year, Year C

The gospel shows us Jesus healing men living in conditions of extreme social isolation. With the media making us aware of the divisions that keep tearing our world apart, we realise, perhaps more acutely than any previous generation, that it is not enough to belong in a family or to a local community. We need to belong in a peaceful world, and this will happen only when we all realise that every person is my sister/my brother. This was Jesus' dream too. He longed for peace, and he knew that only when we open our hearts to receive the same Spirit, the Spirit of love from the One who is the source of everyone's life, will our broken world experience healing. All ten lepers experienced physical healing. But only one was fully healed - the one who recognised the source of his healing and came back to thank Jesus.

The word 'Eucharist' means 'Thanksgiving'. We are here now, like the leper, thanking Jesus for healing us. He has welcomed us into a family that is called 'Catholic' ('universal'), because it is committed to reach out to the whole world to continue Jesus' mission of love. We want everyone to know, as Naaman the leper knew (see today's First Reading, 2Kings 5:14-17), that healing comes from the God of Israel, the God whom Jesus called 'Father'. Jesus told us to take this word to the ends of the earth. It is a word, as Paul tells us, that 'cannot be chained' (see today's Second Reading, 2Timothy 2:8-13).

Today's Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 98) seems to have been composed to celebrate the reuniting of families after the trauma of the exile in Babylon. It is an exultant hymn of thanksgiving for the salvation, that is to say, the healing wrought by God. We sing it again today, but our hearts know that, while we are filled with gratitude for the healing which we celebrate here at the Eucharist, we cannot be fully healed while the world continues to be divided.

One of the major obstacles to world peace is the division among Christians. Our duty to work for Christian Unity is the subject of an Encyclical issued by Pope John-Paul II in 1995. It takes its title from the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper 'That all may be one' (John 17:11). The Pope begins and ends his letter by mentioning the unity we already experience in the shared sanctity of Christians of all churches who have given their lives for Christ: something that is hapening daily and to a terrifying degree today throughout the Middle East. The pope hopes that we can overcome what he calls the 'burden of long-standing misgivings inherited from the past' the 'mutual misunderstandings and prejudices', the 'complacency', 'indifference', and 'insufficient knowledge of one another' (n.2) that 'openly contradict the will of Christ, scandalise the world, and damage that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature' (n.6, quoting UR§1).

He acknowledges the sins of the members of the Catholic Church and humbly asks all to join in asking for his own conversion (n.4). He also asks forgiveness for the hurts caused by the way in which popes have misused their ministry (n.88).

The central section of the Encyclical is a record of the advances that have taken place in recent history. He speaks, for example, of the profound impression made upon him when, during his visit to Sweden, the Lutheran bishops approached him as he was distributing communion. They did not request communion, but they did ask for a blessing, thus expressing their deep longing for the day when full unity will be expressed in shared communion. 'I blessed them with love',

says the Pope (n.72). The Pope has the same longing. We have come a long way, but (he writes): 'It is now necessary to advance towards visible unity ... so that the Churches may truly become a sign of that full communion in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church which will be expressed in the common celebration of the Eucharist'(n.78, cf Acts 15:28).

Nearly all Christian communities were united during the first thousand years of the Church's history, during which the Bishop of the Church of Rome - the scene of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul (see the Encyclical n.90) - was accepted as the successor of Peter and the symbol of unity. The division that tore the Eastern and Western Churches apart in the 11th century, and the division of the Western Church along largely national lines in the 16th century, left the Christian community traumatised and deeply wounded. We know what it can be like when any family falls apart. These were divisions on a grand scale, affecting the very meaning of life, and the effects are still painfully with us.

One still encounters groups that claim to be Christian who look upon the Catholic Church as belonging to the devil, and it is only since the Vatican Council that most Catholics have been encouraged to look at the obvious goodness of other Christians and other Christian churches rather than focus on their deficiencies. There is a prevailing desire to put the hurts behind us, to give forgiveness and to ask for it, and to hear the plea of Jesus at the Last Supper praying that his followers would be one: 'May they all be one as you, Father, are in me and I in you. I pray that they may be one in us, so that the world may believe that it was you who sent me'(John 17:11).

We all need forgiveness. We all need the gift of God's Spirit as we walk our pilgrim path towards God (see Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio* 1964 §6). All churches are in constant need of reform and we have much to offer each other. We who maintain the ancient link with Rome are grateful for the many blessings in Christian life, in the sacraments, and in theology that this has brought us. We are also conscious of the special responsibility we have to share our spiritual riches with other Christians. Today we are being encouraged also to open our hearts to the riches that they have to offer us (see the Vatican II document '*Unitatis Redintegratio* §4). When a family breaks apart, everyone loses. Reconciliation brings healing to all.

One of the most significant steps taken by Pope John XXIII in preparation for the Second Vatican Council was to set up in 1960 a Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. It had a profound influence on the agenda and the spirit of the Council.

Immediately upon his election as pope in June 1963, Paul VI set about planning a symbolic journey to the Holy Land. On the 6th January the following year, the Feast of the Epiphany - which is the celebration of Incarnation for the Orthodox Church - he met and prayed with the Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras II in Bethlehem. His words re-assure us that ecumenism is not a matter of religious indifference, as though it is equally good whatever we believe. Ecumenism is not saying that it doesn't matter any more which church you belong to. It is not saying that we are all the same. But it is saying that we want to journey towards Jesus and so towards each other under the guidance of his Spirit (UR §7). As Pope Paul VI said at that historic meeting: 'Even on this very special occasion we must say that complete Christian unity is not to be attained at the expense of the truths of faith. We cannot be false to Christ's inheritance: it is not ours but his; we are no more than its stewards, teachers, interpreters. Yet we declare once

again that we are ready to consider every reasonable means by which mutual understanding, respect and charity may be fostered. The door of the fold is open. We wait, all of us, with sincere hearts. Our desire is strong and patient. There is room for all. Our affection anticipates the step to be taken; it can be taken with honour and mutual joy. We shall not call for gestures that are not the fruit of free conviction, that are not the fruit of the Spirit of the Lord, who blows when and where he wills'.

Pope John-Paul also speaks of the importance of the truth in our quest for Christian unity - a quest which he calls 'a duty which springs from the very nature of the Christian community'(n.49): 'Love for the truth is the deepest dimension of any authentic quest for full communion between Christians. Without this love it would be impossible to face the objective theological, cultural, psychological and social difficulties which appear when disagreements are examined. This dimension, which is interior and personal, must be inseparably accompanied by a spirit of charity and humility. There must be charity toward one's partner in dialogue, and humility with regard to the truth which comes to light and which might require a review of assertions and attitudes'(Ut Unum Sint n.36).

Individual Christians are to follow the calling of grace, and we are always sad to see those we love leave us, while our hearts are refreshed by those who find with us a welcome and a home in which they can find meaning and love. But on the larger scale, considering churches and not individual Christians, we no longer think of other churches returning to the Catholic Church. The word coined by Paul VI and which gives the title to the decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council, is the word 're-integration'. It is the mending of division in which all parts come together to restore the broken unity. All have something to offer and all have something to receive.

Ecumenism is not easy. You might remember the first visit of a Pope to Australia. That was in December 1970. The Anglican Archbishop of Sydney declined to attend the ecumenical service. Pope Paul acknowledged his absence in words that were full of respect: 'History cannot be written off overnight and the honest hesitations of sensitive consciences always demand our respect and understanding.'

We call ourselves 'Catholics'. In refusing to accept that we are just one of any number of denominations, we are making a claim that is not meant to be in any sense triumphalist. We are proclaiming that we are committed to the vision of their being one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Our name keeps before all Christians the universal vision of Jesus.

On the feast of Pentecost 1966, Paul VI announced the establishment of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians. He spoke of what it means to be 'catholic': 'To take away from the Church its qualification of 'catholic' would mean to change its face, the face Christ wants and loves; it would mean to go against the intention of God who wanted to make the Church the expression of his unbounded love for mankind. ... When the name 'catholic' becomes an interior reality, all egoism is overcome, all class struggle develops into full social solidarity, all nationalism is reconciled with the good of the world community, all racism is condemned, and all totalitarianism is unmasked in its inhumanity ... A catholic heart means a heart with universal dimensions: a heart that has overcome the basic narrowness that prevents us listening to our calling towards supreme love. It means a magnanimous heart, an ecumenical heart, a heart

capable of embracing the whole world'.

More than ever today, Christian unity is essential if the world is ever to hear Jesus' message of love in a way that will bring the human race together in love in the one fold with the one shepherd. Let us continue to thank God for the heritage that is ours and experience a deep desire to share it. Let us feel the pain of division and not only welcome others, but allow them to welcome us, so that together we can enrich each other in his love.

Let us conclude these brief reflections with the concluding words of the decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council: 'This council declares that it realises that the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ transcends human powers and gifts. It therefore places its hope entirely in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. 'And hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured forth in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us'(Romans 5:5)'(UR §24 - alluded to in 'That they may be One' n.8).