

4th Sunday of Easter (B)  
(Acts 4:8-12 / John 10:11-18)  
26.04.2015

Everyone wants to belong.

People long to be accepted, respected and welcomed. People long to be accepted, respected and welcomed for who and what they are.

To belong, to be accepted, respected and welcomed is something we all desire for ourselves. This desire comes from the deepest level of our being. It results from our having been made in God's image and likeness and that knowledge inscribed within each one of us that our first and last belonging is to Him.

Ultimately, we will ever only find our fulfilment in the Lord, for only in Him will we ever become fully our self, our true self

Our God has for name: *I am*.

Made *in His image and likeness*, we long *to be*.

Over and over again in John's gospel we hear Jesus say: *I am*.  
Clearly, Jesus defines Himself as *being: I am*.

Within the word *be-long* is the notion of *longing to be*.

Desirous to resemble Jesus, we naturally *long to be*.

It follows on from this that as Church we are called to be concerned for those who have little or no sense of belonging.

Yes, as Church we are called to be attentive to those who yearn for acceptance, respect and welcome.

If we were to sum up all that longing in one word, the word that comes to mind is *hospitality*.

Yes, hospitality is something people long for: it is something we yearn for in our lives too.

That word *hospitality* is an interesting one.

We have contained within it the word *hospital*.

Now a hospital is a place of healing.

Note the healing concept within the word hospitality: *hospital-ity*.

With my claim that people long for hospitality, I would say that, over and beyond a mere welcome, what people really long to experience is healing from that alienation which is part of the human experience ever since the Fall of our first parents. For, sin having entered into our world we experience our lives at times as cut off from God, cut off from others and even cut off from ourselves.

(Whether or not we fully recognise this, of course, is another matter.)

In people's longing to be accepted, respected and welcomed, their desire receive hospitality, I sense there is a more profound longing still: it the longing for deep inner *healing*.

Furthermore, it is my firm conviction (born of my own experience and the observation of that of others) the reception of genuine, open, warm-hearted, non-judgemental hospitality is for all those who receive it a profoundly healing experience.

We see this over and over again, do we not?

People who feel themselves to have been welcomed frequently bear witness to having experienced a healing grace through the hospitality afforded them.

This came home to me very recently when I met a person who said to me that years before, in a chance meeting with my late mother, she had felt truly accepted, respected and welcomed for the person she was for the very first time in her life.

*A stranger made me feel welcome that day in a way I had never felt before, even by those close to me in my family and community of life.* (Her community of life at that time was actually a Religious community.)

This person went on to say: *A healing process began in me that day,*

When we read the gospels we see how Jesus' healing miracles would always begin with Him welcoming the broken, wounded, suffering person who stood before Him.

The welcome Jesus offered these people was their first step on the way to recovery, healing and well-being.

All this to say that hospitality is so important!

It is so important to have been graced to have availed of hospitality and so important to offer it to others.

I think it fair to say that those who offer the gift of hospitality to others participate in Christ's own healing ministry.

What I have said so far introduces words spoken by Jesus in today's gospel passage: words of profound significance, words whose implications for our lives we must grasp.

In the section of the Good Shepherd discourse we read this morning (the Good Shepherd discourse is one of a number of *I am* discourses which punctuate John's gospel) we hear Jesus make it clear to His disciples and the other listeners gathered there: *There are other sheep that I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well.*

Do these words not invite us to widen our horizons to the dimensions of Christ Himself?

I would say that they very clearly invite us to include in our concern all those who are outside the little sheepfold we form and among them surely some we might not for whatever reason (frequently senseless prejudice) we might not want to include in our little sheepfold.

Hard as it may be for us to admit this, the truth is that all too often we lack Jesus' breadth of vision.

All too often we settle for the comforts of a restricted little sheepfold rather than daring to embrace the wider, more open and inclusive (indeed, all-inclusive) vision of Christ-Jesus.

Christ's vision was and is for the inclusion of all, the turning away of none.

He makes it clear in the gospels that He will not turn away any who come to Him.

*Whoever comes to me I will not turn that one away.*

In contrast we may sometimes turn others away.

It happens that we say to some in no uncertain terms, or else just send out very strong signals that communicate to them, that they are not really welcome in *our* Church, as if the Church was *ours*; as if it befell us to determine who should gain access, who should be counted in or who should be barred entry, refused the possibility of belonging!

We may prefer to be with those who are of our own *type*, those with whom we feel comfortable, but Jesus invites us to think bigger and wider.

He invites us to be as all-embracing as He is shown to have been (to be!) in the gospels.

If Jesus turned no one away, can we honestly do so, using Christ's name to justify our exclusions?

There are many who feel excluded from our Churches.  
Their feelings of exclusion call down judgement upon us!

Once again news coverage this week has contained the story of offensive remarks against LGBT people and supposed Christian principles will have led to those offensive remarks.

This is but one example of a group of people being made feel excluded.  
(Others might be those is second unions.)

Racist attacks have also been much in the news this week.

We cannot content ourselves to condemn those who throw pipe bombs, paint bombs or stones.  
Racist remarks and/or attitudes in the hearts of people who would never throw a stone, propel the arms of those who do so!  
To think in racist terms fuels racism!

Let's be honest enough to admit that it happens in Christian circles that people think and speak in ways that are racially prejudiced.

Before going any further than the pale of Christianity, we have to recognise and own up to the fact that there are multiple mutual exclusions within the Christian family itself.

What a scandal it is that we are still held apart at the Lord's Table, given that the Lord gave His life for all and the Eucharist is the sacrament of His life-giving love!

If our communities, our Churches, are no more than what might be deemed *holy huddles* they do not merit the title Christian communities, Christian Churches.

A *holy huddle* comports all the risks of being sectarian and exclusive.

Attitudes of sectarianism and exclusion are simply not an option for those who call themselves Christian.

If we are sectarian and exclusive in our attitudes we are just not members of the Church of Jesus-Christ!

I am led on this Good Shepherd Sunday to think of some of the things Pope Emeritus Benedict said at the inauguration of his ministry as Bishop of Rome.

Let me recall some of his words for you that day.

After having spoken of the images of the Good Shepherd and Fisherman in his inaugural address, drawing from them implications for the papal ministry in the Church, Pope Benedict went on to say: *Here I want to add something: both the image of the shepherd and that of the fisherman issue an*

*explicit call to unity. 'I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must lead them too, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd'. (Jn 10:16); these are the words of Jesus at the end of His discourse on the Good Shepherd. And the account of the 153 large fish ends with the joyful statement: 'although there were so many, the net was not torn' (Jn21:11). Alas, beloved Lord, with sorrow we must now acknowledge that it has been torn! But no - we must not be sad! Let us rejoice because of Your promise, which does not disappoint, and let us do all we can to pursue the path towards the unity You have promised. Let us remember it in our prayer to the Lord, as we plead with Him: yes, Lord, remember your promise. Grant that we may be one flock and one shepherd! Do not allow Your net to be torn, help us to be servants of unity!*

Earlier in his discourse Pope Benedict pronounced words which we could and indeed should equally make our own: *We serve not only Christ, but the salvation of the whole world, of all history ... the lost, sick or weak sheep.*

Benedict XVI was clear on our own and others' needs.

*The human race - every one of us - is the sheep lost in the desert which no longer knows the way.*

But he saw hope being there for us.

*The Son of Man will not let this (loss) happen; He cannot abandon humanity in so wretched a condition. He leaps to His feet and abandons the glory of heaven, in order to go in search of the sheep and pursue it, all the way to the Cross. He takes it upon His shoulders and carries our humanity; He carries us all ... and, at the same time, invites us to carry one another.*

Finally, the emeritus pope's thoughts turned to those outside the fold:

*So many people are living in the desert. And there are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God's darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts of the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.*

*The Church as a whole must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God ...*

The desert is a place without food and drink to sustain people.

The Lord calls us to do all we can to bring people to a place where they can be nourished and sustained.

He invites us to find a way of leading them to the Table of the Eucharist where He desires all to find a welcome.

Yes, as Church we have for mission to lead men and women to that place where their *longing to be* will find fulfilment: to that place of their *belonging*, which is Christ.

Amen!