

6th Sunday of Easter (A)
(Acts 8:5-8.14-17 / John 14:15-21)
17.05.2020
We are not alone

“This day was made by the Lord, let us rejoice and be glad!” This verse from Psalm 119 which we just sang at the end of our Gospel reading should challenge us deeply.

I hope that we have the courage to ask ourselves: “Is today really a day in which we rejoice and are glad?” It is hard to do so with many people struggling for their lives because of Covid-19, and many others diagnosed with grave illness who cannot receive proper medical treatment—again – because of Covid-19. It is hard to rejoice and be glad when more than 3 million children and pregnant women suffer from acute malnutrition in Yemen, and while the number of victims from domestic violence has increased dramatically these past weeks... the list could go on for a long time.

We have to be honest. To sing or to hear: “This day was made by the Lord, let us rejoice and be glad!” without feeling a certain unease would be very strange. It would just mean that we do not really pay attention to the words we pronounce during our celebrations.

We must ask why is it right for us to say today: “This day was made by the Lord, let us rejoice and be glad!”?

In our biblical readings, we are given two reasons to believe that there is cause for us, as Christians plodding our way through this world, to rejoice and be glad today and every day.

The first encouraging statement comes from the Lord who says: “I will not leave you orphans.” This promise which has been fulfilled in the fact that we have become, through the Holy Spirit the dwelling place of the Trinity, is the rock on which we can stand firm.

Through faith, we know that we are not orphans. Here it may be useful to remember that in Jesus’ time, not only were the orphans poor and destitute but they were also deprived from any status and identity in society.

When the psalmist tells us that “God is the father of the orphans” (65:8), we must understand that God’s presence within us is the assurance of our dignity as human beings. We are not alone. Before Easter, the Abbot Primate of our Order sent a circular letter to all our communities. In it, Dom Gregory Polan quotes Ps 125: “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time on and for evermore” (v. 2) and he comments: “What a powerful image for us to reflect on. In effect, the Psalmist tells us that we live, move and have our being in the embrace of God’s loving care. God’s life-giving protection and care surrounds us, even when we do not feel it. Like the mountains that stand firm in their place, encircling Jerusalem, God’s steady, stable and strong arms remain a force that guides the course of world events, including the one in which we all now stand.” (22.03.2020)

Maybe we could say that the act of faith consists precisely – and essentially – in remembering and in clinging to the experience that, not only God does exist, but that he dwells within us, that, by grace, you and I, and all men and women are surrounded by his love. We have not been left orphans. To keep in mind that there is, within us, One who is always at hand can be difficult sometimes; it can be hard work for us to remember and to remain rooted in the memory of God’s abiding presence in our lives, yet, as St Paul reminds us, perseverance “produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” (Rm 5:4-5)

The second reason for us to rejoice and be glad is found in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. We are told that the people were “united”. The Greek adverb used here is very strong, it is about “being one mind, one heart”; literally it is about having “one passion”. It is a very important word in the Acts of the Apostles, the author of this book uses it 10 times in order to describe what Christianity is about: a community of men and women made one, being moved by one and the same energy in one and the same direction. This is a gift as much as a responsibility.

We do not achieve such unity by ourselves, by good coaching or coercive methods but by love which, according to St Bernard Tolomei, is what makes us one.

In this unity we find deep joy and great strength in the midst of our difficulties. We are not alone. Beyond all distinctions of race, culture, sexual orientation, political opinion and whatever we can imagine, if we are in Christ, we are rooted and grounded in love (cf. Eph 3:17), and so we are one. Our unity is the fruit of God’s love poured into our hearts (cf. Rm 5:5).

We may not be in the fun mood today; we may be feeling exhausted, or bearing a heavy burden, and yet remembrance and the knowledge of the fact that we are not alone should help us to persevere and continue the journey.

Recently Pope Francis reminded us that, among the many voices which surround us, there is the voice of the enemy, the tempter who says to us: “Close yourself up in yourself (...), do not be trusting.” (Regina Caeli, 03.05.2020)

The present Covid-19 pandemic has generated many beautiful, amazing and encouraging human initiatives yet, we must be aware that it can also feed mistrust and isolationism. As many among us are afraid, we can be tempted to withdraw into small and narrow bubbles, we can become more obsessed – than we already are – with security and self-protection. The only way not just to survive but to live is together in community, in mutual dependence and reciprocal self-giving.

In his Easter message, the President of Germany spoke eloquently about the risks which threaten our countries. He asked: “Will we join up around the world to search for a solution – or will we fall back into isolation and everyone going it alone? (...) We do not want society to become anxious or distrustful. This pandemic is not a war. Rather, it is a test of our humanity. It brings out the worst and the best in people. Let us show each other our best side!” (Frank-Walter Steinmeier, 11.04.2020) Not only the pandemic is a test for humanity, it is also a test of our Christianity.

Today we are reminded that our joy and our strength are found in the promise that God is with us always and in the call to live together as one in love. We are strong because we are together with God and with one another.

Let us take the time to pray and to read the Scriptures, time to worship with others through the internet so that we may in truth be heralds of God’s loving kindness and strengthening presence. Let us be courageous enough to use words and to pose acts which speak of presence and attention to others.

May we not allow fears and anxiety to prevent us from bearing witness to the fact that we are not alone; let us remember that we are responsible for one another and belong to “a single and interdependent family” (Pope Francis, General Audience, 22.04.2020).