

3rd Sunday of Easter (C)
(Acts 5:27-32.40-41 / John 21:1-19)
01.05.2022
Mend the net!

There is no doubt that Peter is the main character in today's Gospel reading. The whole story is a build up to the concluding dialogue between Jesus and the apostle.

While this is true, given that the Catholic Church is engaged in a synodal path, there is a small element in the story which can help us reflect on the role and identity of the whole Church: the small element in question is the net which figures in the story and is, in fact, the main agent of Jesus' miracle.

We should not be surprised to find the net mentioned four times, not only because we are in the company of fishermen but also because we remember that Jesus said to his disciples: "Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people." (Mt 4:19)

In the context of the Synod the net can be considered as an image that teaches us something about the ministry of the Church.

The first lesson we can draw from the Gospel passage heard is that the net is empty when the apostles go fishing on their own initiative. It is only when the Lord sends them out that the net is filled with big fish. And so our ministries, our witness, our efforts, our gifts and talents bear fruit only if they are inspired, moved by Christ's power at work within us which is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask or imagine (cf. Eph 3:20). We are God's instruments. Ultimately, the fecundity of the Church depends upon the Lord and not on us. In the Church there should be no self-appointed ministers, no self-reliant disciples.

At every levels of our Christian communities, it is absolutely necessary to foster a spirit of attentive listening to what the Spirit says to the Churches. All, the faithful lay people and clerics, must listen to God and to one another if they want to be fruit-bearing disciples.

Another aspect which is quite important for our reflexion is that Jesus asks the apostles to throw the net where they think there is nothing to catch. The mission of the Church is precisely to go where many think that there is nothing to be done in that place; the mission of the Church is to cast the net in those places where people are inclined to think that there is no hope for growth, change or new life. In the Church we should give up on nobody. No place and no person should be dismissed or considered beyond the power of the Spirit who is able to "turn the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs." (Ps 107:35)

Our attentive listening to what the Spirit says to the Church should inevitably lead us to places and people not on the top of our list of priorities... not on our wish list. We must not allow our fears, disappointments, and routine to close us in upon ourselves. We must not resign ourselves to the small and cosy ways we are used to and comfortable with. The net must be ready to be thrown whenever and wherever the Lord indicates.

In our Gospel reading, there is also the mention that "in spite of the great quantity of fish the net was not broken." This shows that we must trust the Church to be able to integrate many nations and remain unbroken. The Church should grow and be able to embrace a huge diversity of cultures and traditions and yet not lose its integrity.

St Matthew tells us that when Jesus called the apostles, they were "mending their nets." (4:21)

If the great catch did not break the net, what can break it?

The answer to that question is found in the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. This crucial dialogue is not only the climax of Peter's life. It is also the litmus test of the Church to whom the question is posed every day: "Do you love me?", "Do you love your sisters and brothers?"

The unbroken net speaks of the powerful strength of love which is stronger than death, and which is the foundation and the cornerstone, the beginning and the end of the Christian life.

The unity of diverse people in the Church stems from love, the love of God in the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us. (cf. Rom 5:5) The net breaks when there is no love. As St Maximos the Confessor declared: "Nothing has caused divisions in the church more than the fact that we do not love one another."

Our reluctance to love, our failure to respect and listen to one another, our slowness to care for and encourage one another threaten the Church's unity and fecundity.

The call to mend the net is what St Paul calls the task of reconciling people to God and to one another (cf. 2Co 5:18). This ongoing work of healing and restoration is accomplished in love and it allows the Church to accomplish its mission of bearing witness to God's love for all his creation.

Love alone keeps the net unbroken, love alone is the binding force of the Church. There is power in love. This love is a costly love. It takes the risk of speaking out against injustice and discrimination, it gives us the courage to speak out against the invasion of Ukraine or against political decisions which do not respect asylum seekers, migrants, the poor and those marginalised in society. This love should give us the courage to vote holding the common good in mind and not just sectarian or selfish tribal interests.

In the Catholic Church in Ireland, in many ways, the net has been broken, but not completely and not beyond repair. There is no doubt that the Synodal Path is the God-given way for us to mend the net and to grow in love of God and of one another.

Here and now, where we stand today, none of us can remain neutral. We are all called to work at mending the net.