

Gospel text

John 20: 19-23

19 Now on the same day, the first of the week, when evening had come and the doors had been closed, where the disciples had taken refuge for fear of the Jews, Jesus made himself present, standing, in the midst of them and said to them, "Peace be in you!" 20 And while saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. Seeing thus the Lord, the disciples were full of joy. 21 Then he said unto them again: "Peace be in you; in the same way that the Father sent me on a mission, I am also sending you". 22 And while saying this, he breathed on them with these words, "Receive the Spirit 23 If you happen to liberate any from their waywardnesses, they will be removed from their life, but if you happen to leave them with their waywardnesses, these will stay with them."

Gospel commentary - Homily

Everything can change

Like many of my contemporaries, I experience a tension between my faith in God and the feeling on certain days that He is so absent that I wonder if He really exists. Take, for example, this couple from the region north of Montreal, in whose hooden men suddenly burst in, not only emptying their bank account, but raping before their bewildered eyes a young woman temporarily residing at home. Does God happen to have a heartache? Or is he indifferent to this mother and her two children, whose husband, a police officer, was shot dead by a 22-year-old young man on the street in Montreal? Is he having fun counting the death toll in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

It is then that I need stories like this Sunday to bring me back to the truth of things, as can be seen by the eyes of faith. The disciples experience great peace and great joy when they feel the presence of Jesus. But this experience takes place in the midst of mourning. Never again will they be able to touch him and walk with him as before. We may celebrate Easter, but we must not forget that it takes place at the end of a path of suffering and death, and that there is a relationship of immediacy which will no longer exist. Can you explain to me the reason for all this mourning? Neither do I. I just know that this path is unavoidable, and that by agreeing to go to the end, I find an unexpected joy and peace.

But there is more. Everything can change. Look at these disciples cloistered in fear. Jesus has the nerve to send them on a mission. And they will go... How did he do it?

I just came back from two weeks of leadership training. The role of leader has two aspects: that of leading, and therefore showing the way, and that of motivating, and therefore of getting people started. Regarding this last dimension, despite the materialistic appearances of our world, surveys show that the strongest motivation for a job is not money, but the possibility of self-realization. When Jesus breathes on the disciples, what does he express? Human beings are inhabited by a force which directs them towards everything that is proclaimed in the Gospel, and this force is a powerful engine which enables them to overcome many obstacles. Jesus' leadership is expressed by the Holy Spirit. Because of this leadership, the disciples will leave the cocoon where they had taken refuge.

The feast of Pentecost aims not only to celebrate the success of Jesus' leadership, but to proclaim his faith that everything can change. If the disciples were able to change, why not me, why not the Church, why not this world? This is where my amnesia or impatience plays tricks on me. Any profound change takes time, a lot of time, and I lose sight of who I was, or what this world was. There is more. My outlook on things changes, and as it changes, it becomes more critical, more demanding, perceiving new gaps. And then I feel like nothing has changed. This remark by an analyst on Robert Mugabe and his role in Zimbabwe is extremely revealing: "He was welcomed as a hero in 1980, but many of the things he did at that time seem to us unacceptable today, because our criteria ethics have changed". The Holy Spirit continues his long work, and this work bears the mark of God, that is to say that it will be eternal and infinite.

Today's story reminds me of one last thing: "If you happen to liberate any from their waywardnesses, they will be removed from their life, but if you happen to leave them with their waywardnesses, these will stay with them" (Usual translation: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained") How to interpret this "if you happen to leave them with their waywardnesses" or "if you retain the sins"? First, from the perspective of the Johannine community, we must immediately put aside a legal approach, as if some would have the right to leave people with their sins. For John, the stake is the entry into the world of faith, and by that in a life that is overflowing. But who bears this responsibility? Me. You. Everyone. So the "to leave them with their waywardnesses" becomes "if you do not follow through on what you are called to as my disciples, people will not have access to this superabundant life".

At the heart of the events which sometimes revolt me, sometimes depress me, the story of this day suggests to me these words of Jesus: "I am always there, but it is you who will have to change things, sometimes accepting certain mournings, as I did it. I delegate this responsibility to you. Do not fear. My Spirit will accompany you and, even if you do not see it, you will be this little stone in the midst of others in the construction of the world".