

Gospel text

Matthew 28: 16-20

16 The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they bowed down to him, but with certain doubts. 18 Jesus came to them and spoke to them in these terms, "A mandate which covers the whole universe has been entrusted to me. 19 Go and show all the nations how to become disciples, baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to assimilate all that I have told you. As for me, I remain with you until the end of time.

Gospel commentary - Homily

The question of identity

We are currently witnessing a surprising phenomenon: the assertion of one's religious affiliation is found on the public scene, when it was believed that society had definitely entered secularization. Muslim women have decided to wear the hijab, while non-practicing parents claim Catholic education for their child. Mega-churches are forming not only in the United States, but also in Guatemala and especially in South Korea where one can accommodate 12,000 people? We must not delude ourselves: we are faced with proselytism, this need to assert our identity and to recruit members, which explains the unfortunate presence of South Korean evangelists in Afghanistan and which has turned into a tragedy. I feel uncomfortable with this phenomenon, because religion often, far from liberating people, makes them more intransigent to the point of pushing someone to write recently in the media: religion should be prohibited to those who are less than 98 years old.

From personal experience, we know that discovering and asserting who we really are is an achievement: it takes the help of others, it takes time, it takes courage. When self-discovery and self-assertion is successful, it is a source of life, it is not exclusive, but on the contrary it is an invitation to dialogue. So what is happening in our world where ethnic and cultural tensions are increasing before radicalizing under the religious facade? Why do Christians believe they can regain their identity by restoring the world of former Christianity rather than evolving towards a new way of being themselves in a different world?

This Sunday is the Sunday when the Ascension of the Lord is celebrated. What connection with the problem of identity? Believe it or not, it is the heart of it. Because what are we trying to say by Ascension? The Jesus, as his loved ones knew him, the Jesus, that we could listen to, touch and embrace, has passed to a new identity. It is the same person, but his presence will be felt in a different way. And if we talk about ascension just like we talk about a promotion at work, it is because his identity has a higher quality.

Let us read again the Gospel of Matthew. The disciples make a journey to go to Galilee, a word which means "Circle of Nations", which we could translate as "International Center". There is something strange happening. The disciples bow down to him, i.e. in faith they recognize him as their master of life, but at the same time they keep certain doubts. Where do these doubts come from? If the Jesus they are experiencing now is exactly the Jesus as they once knew him, there would be no problem. But precisely, there is something that has changed in him, his identity has gone up. What exactly? The Jesus who once said, "I have only been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel", says rather now, "A universal mandate has been entrusted to me, go to all nations."

And look at the rest: "Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit". The emphasis here is not on the legal value of baptism or its obligation, but on the fact that the believer receives his new identity not from any prophet or pope, but from God himself. Don't we say: such are the parents, such are the children. Now, God, the source of our life, is presented to us in the diversity of people: the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Imagine! Our God is presented to us in the face of diversity. Can we then be surprised at the diversity of our world? This new birth is finally expressed by the invitation to assimilate the teaching of Jesus, more particularly his sermon on the mount where he says, "You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world". Do you understand why to fall back on the past is to move away from our being and our mission?

In my life, I have learned to constantly say yes to new realities, and I believe I have known a form of ascent, where I saw new dimensions of my being. The ascension of Jesus has a unique dimension: because he loved this world so diverse to the point of leaving his life in it, he now has the very quality of God which now allows him to be universally present in this world. I pray to walk in his footsteps. And you?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, December 2007