

Sixth Sunday of Easter

“Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you.”

1 Peter 3, 15-18

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments...My Father will give you another advocate, the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot accept because it neither sees him nor recognizes him; but you can recognize him because he remains with you and will be within you...I will not leave you orphaned.”

John 14, 15-21

Recently, I attended a private screening of the film *Of Gods and Men*. It was released in France as: *Des hommes et des dieux (Of Men and Gods)*. It won the Grand Prix at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, and takes its title from a quotation from Psalm 82: “You are gods, all of you sons of the Most High; yet like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.” (Ps 82, 6-7) *Of Gods and Men* opens for screening in Sydney cinemas this weekend.

The film powerfully recounts the story of a small monastery of Trappist monks located in the mountain village of Tibhirine during the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s. The community of eight monks was like an oasis in the desert, a place of peace, welcome and compassion in the midst of the horror and brutality that existed all around it. The monks lived humble, simple and happy lives among their Muslim neighbours. They cultivated a garden, kept bees, and, through their guest-house, extended hospitality, medical care and compassion to all who turned up looking for help. They made no attempt to convert their Muslim neighbours. The simplicity and generosity of their lives served as a bridge between Christianity and Islam.

As the violence around them escalated, government officials began to urge the monks to abandon their monastery. In their turn, the monks agonized over what they should do. When one of the Muslim villagers asked one of them what they intended to do, the Brother replied: “We’re like birds on a branch. We just don’t know if we’ll leave.” However, one of the village women turned the monk’s response around, saying: “No, we are the birds. You are the *branch*. If you go, we’ll lose our footing.”

Through the simplicity and prayerfulness of their lives, this Trappist community became a “branch” of God’s love and care for both their Muslim and Christian sisters and brothers. They became a sign of God’s Spirit through their integrity, through their words of comfort and compassion and, above all, through their unheralded acts of reconciliation and peace.

The Spirit promised by Jesus to his followers is an advocate for all that is good and right and just, despite any scepticism, blindness or rejection which we can sometimes demonstrate. The challenge for all of us is to be alert to recognize and grasp the opportunities which God’s Spirit puts to us to become “branches” of hope and healing for those in search of a place of respite and welcome.

Today's gospel speaks of the Spirit of truth whom our world cannot accept "because it cannot see him or recognize him" (John 14, 17). What exactly does John mean when he writes that the world cannot (or will not?) recognize truth? He's not referring to the acceptance or rejection of changes (superficial or significant) that are made to things like language in the liturgy or to popular beliefs embedded in expressions like: "Weren't we taught that the Church never changes?" or "Wasn't it true that you could once upon a time walk our streets in safety?" All that is about wanting the security of the tried and true or yearning for the so-called "good old days."

No, John is referring to a reaction to truth that is both considered and malicious. Essentially, it's a denial of the truly known shape of love. John accuses the world of deliberately stifling its capacity to love and ignoring all the opportunities for loving that are presented to it day in and day out. John clearly tells us all that God's Spirit lives deep within us, constantly reminding us of the shape of love. The image which John uses is that of a lawyer arguing a case for love against those who would deny its presence. God's Spirit insists that love is not only possible but that it has a shape and form in life which cannot be counterfeited. Its imitation will never pass for the real thing.

As if to drive his point home, Jesus goes on to say to his disciples: "I will not leave you orphans" (John 14, 18). Orphans are those who have literally been deprived of that embodiment and shape of love with which they are most familiar. The state of emptiness and confusion which follows can leave orphans disoriented and devastated. However Jesus promises his Spirit to assure his disciples that they will not be orphaned, that they will not lose their ability to recognize and experience the true shape of love.

As Christians, we have to be courageous enough to live with integrity, never ignoring God's Spirit and never pretending that we do not know the true shape of love. The Trappists of Tibhirine are an inspiration as to how to go about it.