Dimensions of the New Evangelisation

New Impulse

When members of the early Church were locked together in one place on that famous Pentecost Day, quite unexpectedly the Holy Spirit burst forth like fire and enflamed the heart of the Church with an ever-new impulse of missionary energy. Ever since, the Church has been committed to proclaiming and living the Good News in every age, circumstance and place. No longer locked, bound or trapped, the Word of Promise was freed from whatever limitations we might place upon its proclamation. The Holy Spirit is the first agent of evangelisation, and transcends our limited vision of what is possible in the lives of individuals, communities and, indeed, the whole human race. The Holy Spirit leads and we respond. It is here that the Church finds and lives its vocation.

When the Apostles began to preach at Pentecost, the Book of Acts tells us that, remarkably, each person heard them in his or her native language. From the earliest moments of the missionary activity of the Church, the Gospel was not contained by vocabulary, language or cultural context. The Gospel is the Word of Life to be heard by each person within his or her own language and understanding, personal history and circumstances, cultural and social imagination. The Church is the bearer of the Gospel, carrying the Word of Life across new horizons and into new settings. There is nothing new about the missionary impulse of the Holy Spirit. What is new is the recognition that new energy is needed today.

Synod on The New Evangelisation:
The Gospel offers a vision of life and of the world that cannot be imposed, but only proposed, as the good news of the gratuitous love of God and of peace. The message of truth and of beauty can help people escape from the loneliness and lack of meaning to which the conditions of post-modern society often relegate them.
This age of evangelisation requires that the Church must first evangelise itself. Paul VI reminded us of this when he wrote: “The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelised herself. She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of familial love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love.” The Church collectively, and all members individually, must be open to the voice of the Spirit, lest in the end we only proclaim ourselves and not the Word of Christ. This call to conversion is continually before us, and there are times when it will be crisis which jolts the Church to listen more attentively and turning more fully to the way of Christ. We are a pilgrim people, and good pilgrims learn the art of listening well.

One of the great gifts of the Holy Spirit is discernment. The age that we live in requires careful discernment and a clear eye to “read the signs of the times”. The story is told in the Book of Acts (27:16-32) of St. Paul heading to Athens and preaching in the Areopagus. He looked around and saw the altar to an unknown god. In short, Paul preached that the god that was “unknown” to the Athenians was known to him, and he spoke to them of the True God who endows each person with the desire to search and stumble their way toward truth, for “indeed God is not far from each of us”. This was an act of evangelical bravado at its best.

Paul’s gift of preaching allowed him to enter into the space in that particular culture left open by the human search for meaning. The Holy Spirit, as the great enticer of the search for truth, creates places of encounter where the Word of Promise meets the hunger for meaning. These places of encounter might be surprising, but the impulse of the Spirit must lead the way in the New Evangelisation.

Dialogue, listening, and discernment are key spiritual postures in the work of evangelisation. As St. Paul shows, so too is a certain amount of foolishness, boldness and imagination. The first step is to not lose sight of what makes the Gospel life-giving and liberating to ourselves and to allow the Spirit to make us transparent messengers of Christ.

Questions for prayer and reflection

In what ways have you been aware of the Holy Spirit as shaping your faith as you have searched for meaning?

In what ways do you see the Church being called to conversion today?

What possibilities for conversion to you see in moments of crisis, either personally or for the Church?

Are there “areopagi” today that can be used as places of encounter to proclaim the Gospel in modern Australia?

What “places” or structures of dialogue are needed today?