**Votive mass of the Holy Spirit for the Start of Gibraltar Synod 2019**

**1 Corinthians 12.4-13; John 20.19-23**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, how fitting that we begin this synod of the Church in this Archdeaconry with a eucharist for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The hymns, prayers and readings this evening speak of the presence of the Holy Spirit among us and underline the reason why we are here at all.

So why are you here for these days of Synod? Of course, the clergy have the easiest answer to that question. *They have to be here* by virtue of their licence. But the rest of you? Why are you here? I like to think that you are here for the excellent preaching, of course! But maybe it is simply because it means you don’t have to cook for the inside of a week!

It is good for us to reflect at the beginning of the synod how we, representatives of the Church in Morocco, Gibraltar, Spain, Portugal, Andorra, can deepen our common life, our common vocation and calling, to *build up the Body of Christ* in these lands. Surely this is why we meet! Surely this is what binds us together!

In tonight’s Gospel, we hear about another gathering of our Lord’s disciples, and they came together for another reason. Listen again: “In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”

This scene was, as you know, on the evening of Easter Day. The Risen Jesus came to meet his disciples, gathered in the Upper Room at Jerusalem. But the reason the disciples had come together is one that is distinct, *perhaps*, from our reasons. We might have supposed that the followers of Jesus would come together to enjoy the friendship that the three years of following Jesus had forged among them. But the Gospel writer St John admits honestly and humbly that the main reason for their gathering was *fear*: the *fear* of the Jews, the *fear* of being arrested, condemned and perhaps even killed. They probably thought that if they came together and banded together as one group, they would be better able to defend themselves.

Dear friends, we certainly know that in these days that there is a lot of fear around that can cause people to band together. We see this in our political life around the world, where many of the slogans are about feat of the other, the foreigner and the stranger. So the solution is to club together to make sure we are “in control” of our laws and our borders! In extreme cases, fear is being stirred up to drive people to want to build walls. How ironic this is, for we in Europe know that this year, 2019, we celebrate the falling of the Berlin Wall! A fear of terrorism creates a sort of international solidarity or clubbing together, at least as a defence, as a means of protection. There is a lot of fear about the future, about political and economic life. And there is the fear of the unknown, of Brexit!

But the thing about fear is that, while it can create a certain kind of unity among the fearful who are clubbing together, behind closed doors and within the safety of walls, it rarely creates the kind of unity which is *attractive* to others. Fear builds a defensive sort of unity, closing in, over and against the other. It is not the kind of unity of a group which is confident in itself, in its inheritance, in its gifts, in its experience. It is not a sort of unified body which seeks *to expand frontiers*, to welcome those who are different and distant, engaging in dialogue, conversation, seeking understanding and embracing others and welcoming them into that unity. Fear prevents us from rejoicing in the fact that adding pieces to a mosaic does not destroy its unity, but enhances its overall beauty.

Instead fear pushes us to build walls, patrol frontier waters, and close doors, and think of protecting ourselves: as indeed it closed the doors of the Upper Room.

But above all, dear friends, fear can close the door of the heart. Let us remember that a door closed out of fear that someone would come in, *also prevents us from going out*, and opening ourselves to engage with others. So fear can never be a characteristic of the Christian Community, for we are always to be opening doors and hearts and widening the company of the friends of Jesus which we call the Church.

It is good for us to reflect at the beginning of the synod about how easy it is for the Church to meet so often with feelings of anxiety which can make us into a little inward looking club, instead of coming together to be open to the call and demands of our God, to be out in the world, with no barriers to our presence, no closed doors, but a quiet confidence to spread the love and the peace of Christ.

But what makes us anxious? What do we fear? What can make us tend to close the doors of our hearts?

Many members of our congregations are feeling the anxieties caused by the uncertainties of life in a post-Brexit Europe. We have less money, not many newcomers are arriving from the UK, for jobs are scarce, and building a permanent life in a new home is less certain than once it was. Many are feeling less secure about the long-term future, apprehensive and unsure about whether they are making the right decisions for their well-being, as they grow older.

And even within our own diocese there a certain sense of fragility, with upcoming archdeacons’ retirements, and funding challenges to sustain the cost of *stipendiary* archdeacons, safeguarding and communications, while budgets on the ground are also feeling stretched and we worry whether we can continue to afford the priestly ministry we have at present. So we can be anxious about whether it is all sustainable…

And then there are some really big concerns: let us not forget as we gather in Synod that we are on the very frontier of the mass movements of peoples into Europe. People are migrating, largely from sub-Saharan African countries, through to North African countries including Morocco, seeking to cross the Mediterranean to new life in Europe. 9 out of 10 migrants crossing the Med these days are from Sub Saharan Africa. And all of this movement, is causing worry and fear among European leaders and among many peoples. To the extent that civilized countries show a lack of action, even when so many lives are being lost. Dear friends, let us not fool ourselves: this is a movement that is not going to go away, and the long-term solution to such global migration is not to simply close doors out of fear, and discourage charities from rescuing human lives at sea! We know what the sources of this mass movement are: wars, disease, drought caused by global warming and climate change, political corruption retaining the wealth and riches of nations for an elite few. We Christians know of these causes, and they are all about *justice*, strangely enough! And therefore, out of our calling “to seek peace and justice” we must never let politicians forget these bigger questions affecting all of humanity.

But returning to our Gospel, look at what those fearful disciples experienced on that evening in the Upper Room. Jesus came to be among them. Here is the Good News: Christ does not even need us to open the door to let him in! He enters without knocking. He joins them, through walls and closed doors, mysteriously, as he joins us in this gathering of synod. He joins them and he joins us because he loves us and because he loves the world. Friends, we need never be fearful, because He will never leave us alone! He breathes his life into us and says “Peace be with you” and then sends us out, through open doors, to extend his mission, the mission of peace, shalom, well-being for the whole world.

As a bishop I preside at many baptisms and confirmations, and you know that at the end of that service, the candidates who have received the sacraments of initiation are led out through the open doors of the Church, bearing candles, into the world. I often say that this is the almost the most important part of the liturgy, for it is a symbol of the most important aspect of Christian life: when we forge a path out through the doors, bearing Christ’s light and presence, into the changing circumstances and conditions of the world. When we are sent out through open doors we go with openness of heart and mind, to welcome conversations about the deep things of life, to approach everyone who is after all a child of God, with loving not judgemental hearts. We are bearing our candles to show that we are lovers of light and truth, dispelling darkness and never colluding with lies. This is evangelism, dear friends, for this is what people the people of the world will experience as good news!

The great apostle St Paul, in the second reading, reminds the people of Corinth and us tonight, the people of Gibraltar Archdeaconry: “There are varieties of gifts, but the Same Spirit; and there varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”. Here is indeed what we celebrate tonight! God’s Spirit energising us all to be in the world, working for the common good.

So dear friends, why are we here? We cannot be content simply to meet to discuss problems, to organise things, to correct what is not working, to look at our inner life, although we will spend some moments doing so. Certainly we must not close ourselves in. We must not be overcome with fear and anxiety that would have us close doors, rather than open them with love. We come together knowing, as scripture teaches us, that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we followers of Jesus have been given gifts; we are able to move forward into the future with confidence, hope, and knowledge that the Spirit is with us and gives us the gifts necessary to bring Good News, and peace, to all people. Remember the Gospel story, about how Jesus joins us, even through closed doors of fear and anxiety. And as he is among us, we can discuss with new inspiration and face any problems together. We can correct things and make bold plans, trusting in God’s grace, and feeling the love and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As the people of God, walking in the Spirit in this Archdeaconry, we are called to be alongside the anxious in our parishes, and with the fearful in the world. We can share with them our confidence that the Spirit of God never abandons us. My friends, we are brought together for a purpose: doors, inner club concerns and, political fears and anxieties, our limitations and barriers to what we might do may be on our minds. But our Lord enters in our midst and is here with us, breaking down barriers and walls and gives us, all of us, the gifts of the Spirit that enable us to walk forward and move outward as the Friends of Our Lord, to build up the Body of Christ, and build, not walls, but the Kingdom of God.