

Along the track

Divide and Conquer? Really??

Division starts in small ways. We argue and dig in rather than agree to disagree. We make judgements without listening or simply on appearances. We let our prejudices loose sometimes or we give ear to someone we know is sowing division or discord or we let a put down of someone go by, laugh even.

So what? Sadly, we live in a world of deepening divisions. How we respond to the times we live in remains a deeply personal thing. There is nothing wrong with having other opinions, other beliefs. Thank God not all of us are called to do the same thing, to react the same way, to think the same way. After all, we are all created 'different', unique but our differences, rather than leading to a diverse and welcoming community, can lead to division and breakdown. Today it would seem our differences are cleverly exploited to ferment division and polarisation even. For example, when governments of all persuasions bring down a budget, the headline in the papers the next day is usually "Are you a Winner or a Loser?" Are we just a nation of winners or losers or a community building a nation together? In the lead up to elections city people are called 'Latte Sipping Inner City whatever's' and country people are often put down by some equally polarising term. Does that lead to understanding or is it designed to drive a wedge between the two? Even in our churches different beliefs and customs can be a source of antagonism and division and we are divided into progressive or conservative rather than people together on a journey.

When we become polarised on an issue or in our beliefs, we leave ourselves open to manipulation. We tend to listen only to those who think and say the same things we do, we live in an echo chamber. I was in Dublin years ago, enjoying the extraordinary hospitality of the Irish. In the mall I heard a person preaching such hate and division (mostly about the Catholic Church) so out of character with the rest of his countrymen. It reminded me of the story of the preacher who was yelling in the public square and a boy went up to him and said that 'no-one is listening to you. You are not going to change anyone'. "I am not yelling for that reason, I am yelling so I can't hear them, so they can't change me."

It seems that at times we are 'yelling' at each other for that reason. We are right, we have the truth and everyone else is wrong. We are challenged by other ways of looking at a situation, other beliefs, other ways of life. So we join an echo chamber where we

only hear our own voice or those who have the same opinions that we have. Those intent on creating or exploiting division are not interested in listening to others, respecting their views and their right to disagree, but rather feeding our biases and indignations so we become even more intolerant, bitter, and judgmental.

Pope Francis will be remembered as the Pope of synodality, promoting a church in dialogue and open conversation with people from different backgrounds, circumstances and experiences, a community coming together to listen to and learn from each other about how to reflect Christ's Gospel in today's world. That doesn't mean we throw out our beliefs and simply soak up what everyone else may be saying but rather it is an openness to growth and learning, an openness to the belief that somehow the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person.

Jesus told us to love one another as he loved us. We are all called to ask ourselves: *given what is happening today, what is love asking of me now?* As Mahatma Gandhi said: If you want to change the world, start with yourself.

What do I do to promote harmony, to build community in my family, my workplace, where I live? Am I able to discuss sensitive matters in a polite and civil way?

Do I really listen to what others are saying or am I preparing my response as they speak?

Do I 'call out' those who promote division and disharmony?

Do I repeat misinformation, rumour? Do I ever ask who is spreading this information and why?

Do I empathise and help others empathise with those who are in tough times, those who are powerless, those who are voiceless, those who struggle to make ends meet, or do I accept the titles like lifters and leaners, strivers and shirkers?

What did Jesus say about division? "Knowing their thoughts", he told them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is headed for destruction, and no city or house divided against itself will stand". (Matthew 12:25).

Regards
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