



Just be kind!

The other day I watched a video of a magpie on top of a spinning roof ventilator. Unperturbed by the movement he sang merrily, for the whole world to hear, balancing perfectly on his spinning stage. It made me laugh. I think many of us are turning to social media platforms for something to distract us from the isolation we are experiencing. Personally, I look for things to lift my spirit and make me smile. Others seem to be looking for answers to the problems of the world and sharing their “like-minded” thoughts with everyone. There seems to me to be a very dark pervasive rhetoric surrounding what is “truth” and what is “fake” in the news we are hearing and reading. Conspiracy theorists are out in full force promulgating false, misleading and frankly dangerous material that more and more people believe to be the “truth”.

Thank God, we live in a free country, and are free to believe what we want, but it seems to me that the negative and suspicious voices are gaining momentum and causing divisions in our families, communities and quite possibly across our country. My own belief is that this comes from a place of fear, of wanting to have certainty around situations that are so disorienting in their uncertainty. If we can be certain about a “truth” then we can feel better for having some kind of answer. Of course, the theories “go viral” on social media platforms. Accusations of government cover-ups, untruths and/or a lack of transparency over numbers of Covid-19 deaths abound. Bill Gates is seen as the devil incarnate, set to make a fortune out of the virus and its effects through a vaccine, or worse, that he plans to inject the world with something or other that will change our DNA...(God help us) the bizarre accusations go on and on.

I do not wish to go to such dark and suspicious places, going against the opinions of the vast majority of our doctors, scientists, and the government. While I welcome the news that a vaccine may soon be found, there are many who will not consent to the idea of a massive call-out to vaccinate 95% of the country. Indeed the Prime Minister has already said that the vaccination program will not be mandatory, but the fear of the erosion of our civil rights is always a contentious and divisive issue.

I imagine that, even in our Catholic communities, there are heated debates among friends and family over these issues. Let's face it, even in the church there are those who believe that our current Pope (who I think is wonderful) is the anti-Christ!! How any sound-minded person could have that idea is beyond me. There you are though; we are complex and contradictory by our very natures. While I might find these beliefs ludicrous, others may well feel that I am naïve to believe anything the government says, refusing to see the "truth". How do we navigate our way around division? How do we respectfully disagree and still love each other?

I think the first thing to consider is that the "discussions" come from a place of concern for the welfare of loved ones and not necessarily from a place of inferred intellectual superiority, (even if it appears that way). However, it is hard not to be annoyed when someone is telling you that you are an ostrich and that you should get your head out of the sand and wake up. Our own egos may have to take a battering in order that we get to the real place of contention, that is, in my opinion, fear. Being reactionary is not helpful that's for sure! Perhaps we need to recognise that a friend or a family member who is driving you crazy with these kinds of conversations may need respectful reassurance. Let them know that although you don't agree, you respect that they have an opinion and that they are entitled to it. However, just as it is their right to have an opinion, living in a free society, my opinion is also equally as important. Easier said than done I know, but mutual respect should always outweigh irritation in relationships within families.

You will not be surprised to hear that divisions and disagreements are not new in the life and history of society or the Church. In fact, they go back to the very beginnings of the early Church. St Paul's letters to the Corinthians gives ample evidence of this. In Chapter 1 of his first letter to the community in Corinth, St. Paul expresses his disappointment and concern for the growing dissent among them about following various apostles whom they believe to have the "real truth". The community was squabbling over their allegiances to Paul, Apollos or Cephas. In response, Paul asked a simple question that goes straight to the crux of the matter. "Is Christ divided?" He drives the point home by asking, "Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised in Paul's name?" Having started the letter with thanksgiving and praise for all God is doing in the Church at Corinth he goes on to correct their errors, but his tone is not accusatory or vindictive. He says:

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought." ... Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose."

This is difficult to achieve in a world where we all have an opinion, and a platform on which we can express it uncensored. It was a similar problem in the early Church. If you think the world is morally corrupt now you should have been in Corinth at the beginning of Paul's journey to establish a community there. Talk about wild! It makes the Island of Ibiza look like a Monastery. Paul was more than justified in his moral teaching, though over time it has often been misinterpreted. He must have had his moments of doubt, but you would not know it from his letters. There is always a deep and abiding confidence in the faithfulness of God – even if we are not always faithful. As a leader, Paul knows and understands that changing your life for the sake of the gospel is a life-long and difficult journey. He also knows that as baptised Christians the community's deepest desire was to serve God as he had taught them. Getting it wrong is part of the journey, so we can be a little kinder to ourselves and others who distress or frustrate us.

Perhaps there is no need to get so irritated about disagreements or opinions. Always at the heart of our relationships, there should be love and mutual respect. "All the world's a stage," as Shakespeare said, and our opinions and arguments will do little to change the big players of this world with all their corruption and ensuing dissent. Change for the better begins when we understand that we are all in this world crisis together, and must find a way through it together! It is the same with dissent in the Church. We may not always get it right, but we are a community of people who love God and wish to serve Him as best we can, together. Listening to each other respectfully with an open heart is so important. Change is also part of the deal and we must learn to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. No one likes change, but sometimes it is forced upon us, and only time makes us realise that the change was for our benefit. As Christians, guided by the Holy Spirit, may we be always bearers of grace and peace to our families, our community and our world.