

In a recent biopic of Winston Churchill at his ‘Darkest Hour’ when Great Britain faces certain defeat on the continent and Parliament seems minded to make peace with Hitler, the tide is turned, not by military might but by words- his famous speech invoking the Dunkirk spirit ‘We will never surrender...’ and Parliament is persuaded to fight on. The very last words in the film are spoken by his now defeated pacifist opponent, Lord Halifax; when asked what has just taken place in Parliament, he replies

He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle

Now, when we think of ‘evangelisation’ we might be tempted to think of it in these terms also: the ‘mobilisation of words’ – and one thinks of the sometimes toe-curling attempts to bring people to conversion by simply throwing words at them. But the ‘good news’ of Jesus goes much deeper than this; words have their part to play but it’s essentially about ‘the mobilisation of love’; and a love which depends, not on us, but on our being incorporated into the love which forever exists between Jesus and his Father. It is, indeed, this Spirit of love which defines us as human beings, which is our deepest fulfilment, which is, if you like, what we are for. This is why, in John’s gospel, it is not only obedience to God’s commandments which is required but knowledge of Jesus, both in the sense of realising who he is as Christ and Son of God, and experiencing this at the level of the Spirit – that is in our deepest depths, where we can know his love for us as inviolable, where indeed we can trust him whatever is happening at other levels. This is

*that Spirit of truth whom the world can never receive
since it neither sees nor knows him
but you know him, because he is with you, he is in you.*

This is using ‘world’ in a pejorative sense to explain the resistance the disciples inevitably encounter when they try to explain to others the ‘mystery’ they have encountered in Christ; that is, the mystery of their own deepest depths. This encounter can take place at any time and in any place to any people; God is not constrained by what we may define as Church: it’s an existential grace available to everyone. But it needs discernment. And so Peter and John go down to Samaria to make quite sure that the Samaritans are getting the full benefit of this experience of love; this experience will always be less than its full reality in this life – such is the nature of mortality – and so we have the sacraments administered by the Church as a sort of pledge or sign of what is yet to come and the Holy Spirit as also our pledge and sign of a future life in God; participants in the ever-flowing love between Father and Son.

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