

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 29 Year B 2018

There is great truth in the saying familiarity breeds contempt. And this unfortunately can apply to our life of faith as much as to most other parts of our lives. Sometimes it requires the perspective of an 'outsider' to sharpen and reawaken the fervour, commitment and boldness that deep, abiding faith requires. The great Indian activist Mahatma Ghandi once famously stated his admiration of the Beatitudes. The trouble was he said, that they had never been tested. Now, I don't happen to think that is true. But it may well have been true of Ghandi's experience: of all the men and women whom he had encountered in his life who claimed to be Christian, it seemed to him none embodied the spirit of the Beatitudes. One of the greatest arguments *against* the existence of God are those who claim to believe in him. Once more, it was Ghandi who said, he would be a Christian if it were not for the Christians.

The cynics (and anti-religionists) around us, of course, cheer at such sentiments. And it might be a hard thing to hear. But it might also be something that stirs us to greater passion and integrity. If we know that some people reject and are repulsed by the faith we profess – if we know that – then perhaps we might be inspired to give more positive witness. Those who love the church, and love the faith she holds, despite all its failings – more specifically, the failings of those who make up the church - might see in such critiques motivation to present another narrative. If so many of our brothers and sisters fail in the Christian ideal (and to be honest, we all do!!) than perhaps we can write another story with our lives. We cannot be responsible how others lead their lives. Personally, we cannot remedy the sins of others. But we can show – in our own lives - that sin and failure and weakness need not have the last and loudest word.

As we now look toward - in but a few short weeks - to our patronal festival of All Saints, we know the saints are perhaps – or ought to be – our best selling point! In lives of heroic virtue, courage, charity, love, mercy, fidelity the saints show us how the faith has indeed been tested and proved true! The promises of Christ have taken hold in their lives. In the lives of the saints we do indeed see lives lived in the spirit of the Beatitudes, formed in the light of the Gospel, and who show that friendship with Jesus is the way to abundance of life. At the same time, it does indeed seem that most of us don't quite get there... And what can be experienced personally - in the lives of individual Christians – in fact can be reflected in wider currents and cultures of the church.

There are times – in different eras and cycles of the church’s history - when the wider culture of the church encourages and expects robust, bold, committed faith. But at other times and in other eras, this is exchanged for a casual, tame, quiet, polite faith. In the West for some generations now, this has become our experience. Every now and then an exceptional light will shine forth. And in some parts of the world today – especially those places where Christian communities are a minority and suffer extreme persecution - the *only* way to be Christian is to live it with boldness and courage. But in our culture, in the West, a certain tiredness, sluggishness, indifference has taken hold of most of the church. The full, robust, complete, challenging faith the Gospel does indeed envisage has in many parts of the church been exchanged for an insipid, dull, imitation.

Now, this is *not new* in the life of the church. As I said before, these things come in waves and cycles. It takes many forms. But perhaps what *is* new about the form of faith encountered and experienced *now*, is the *confusion* that is such a feature of church life today. In their aversion challenging demands of catholic and apostolic faith, the modernist and liberal agenda has thrown everything up in the air and we’re expected to make sense of the mess as it all comes tumbling back down.

As Catholic Christians we know that faith *is not* a question of throwing things up in the air and trying to construct something in our own image. As Catholic Christians we know that being a faithful believer means signing up to a package deal. Compromise and friendship with the world – which are the principal causes of so much of today’s confusion – *cannot* be the framework out of which we operate, if we wish to be true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the epistle portion today, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, *never let go of the faith that we have professed. For it is not as if we had a high priest who is incapable of feeling our weakness with us.* For sure, we all know our struggles to realise the Christian ideal, and to hold fast to the faith once delivered. But faith is not trusting in our own abilities or clever ideas, or constructs of our own making. Its trusting Christ who seeks to raise us up and grants us the grace to be faithful.

Now, somewhat consolingly and reminding us of the trustworthiness of the gospel witness – not shying away from the foibles and thick-headedness of the apostles - the gospel portion today once more shows us how slow the apostles were; how they so readily misapprehend and misinterpret his message and mission.

Remarkably, James and John are part of Jesus' inner-most circle. The two brothers, along with Peter, are part of that band most intimate with Jesus, who witness the Transfiguration, who are with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. If anyone ought to have apprehended and accepted the whole package it was these guys!

But in their request for places of honour they show how they just don't get it! They ignore so much of what Jesus has already imparted and replaced it with their *own version*, of what *they think* Jesus's message and mission *ought* to be. In the verses which *immediately* follow what we hear today, Jesus tells the twelve all that will happen to him in Jerusalem: that he will be betrayed, handed over, condemned to death, mocked, spat upon, flogged and killed. All this is told them just before James and John blurt out with their crazy alternative! It shows they have simply been unable to accept full implication of what it means to follow Jesus. They too have sought to tame it, mould it to their own milder version. The temptation of our age to settle for a watered down, compromised Gospel is the exact issue at play in the request of James and John. Imagining the kingdom of God is to be associated with honour and prestige is just one of the classic ways the church has undermined and compromised the gospel.

But in Jesus asking if they could drink the cup he were to drink draws on a typical Old Testament motif of the fate that lies ahead of a person. Sharing in the baptism with which he is to be baptised doesn't refer to the sacrament as we know it. Rather, a biblical image in which trials and dangers are depicted as going through stormy, turbulent waters. That is what is ahead. That is part of the package. This is what it means to follow Jesus. This is part of the cost involved. And just as Jesus obediently follows the path the Father has laid out for him, so too his disciples must step out in complete trust. And so the foibles of James and John can be an opportunity to instruct the other disciples, Jesus reminds that he came not be served but to serve. If anything, this tells us being a disciple is not about us, about furthering our agenda, insisting on our clever ideas. They only undermine the pure gospel of Jesus Christ. Despite their slowness to apprehend the full implications of Jesus' message and mission, in the light of the resurrection and in the power of the spirit of Pentecost, the apostles do indeed come to fullness of faith. They *do not* carry a watered down, compromised, faith to the ends of the earth. It is not for an insipid, uninspiring faith they will gain the martyrs crown. Following Jesus does not take us a safe, convenient, pleasant path. It takes us, if we dare follow where he leads, to the challenge and commitment of the cross. Amen.