

Sermon Trinity VI/Ordinary Sunday 15 Year A 2023

One of the trends of contemporary life is to try and make most things easy and accessible. There is great value placed in informality and casualness. This is certainly the case in this country. Everyone is on a first-name basis. Teachers can no longer fail students. Where once all men wore ties and suits, now this dress code is restricted mostly to city workers, and then not necessarily. As long as you are comfortable and relaxed, so the logic goes. We are suspicious of hierarchies and authority. Because they suggest that not all things are accessible to everyone all the time. We are suspicious of expertise, because that suggests some people are better equipped to say some things and others are better equipped to do some things more so than others. In the effort to make things easy and more accessible, we find that so much of the richness and complexity of human life has in fact been flattened out.

This dynamic we have also seen play out in large parts of the church. In an experiment that has now gone on well past 50 or 60 years, we have heard constant calls to make the faith more easy and accessible. As the world around us has changed - and changed at a seemingly ever-increasing rate - well then, the church also needs to change. But as has frequently been said from this pulpit, this is a fool's errand. We end up simply echoing the culture back to itself. The timeless truths of Jesus Christ and of the church he founded, lose their meaning. And there is no reason for anyone to either believe in, or belong to, the church.

But this urge to make the faith more easy and accessible remains one of the great points of tensions currently at play in the church. It has caused deep fractures to appear which show little or no signs of healing. I hope and pray that you are preserved from much of this. But I suspect most, if not all of you, have been exposed to this thinking - and its implications - one way or another. The examples are numerous. And you can share with each other your own experiences with of churches seeking to be relevant but in fact missing the mark. But a few brief examples to highlight the point.

In the Episcopal Church of America there were recent efforts to change the canons of the church to permit those who have not been baptized from receiving Holy Communion. The issue was up for debate simply because the practice was already widespread, in what is known as 'open communion.'

You can imagine the arguments: Oh, Jesus welcomed everyone; the church is for everyone; Jesus came to tear down man-made barriers; who are we to say no to people who come in good conscience.... Ideas that can only be imagined from a cherry-picking reading of the Gospels. But it is but a symptom of a hyper-individualized belief system. And a belief system that seeks to make the bar to belonging so low as to be barely recognizable. Thankfully, there was significant push back and the move failed. But the case highlighted this deep trend of seeking to make the faith easy and accessible.

The Archbishop of York a few days ago in the opening address to the General Synod of the Church of England suggested the opening of the Our Father was 'problematic'. This idea was offered only as a sort of throw-away line. But revealed a common theme, that what Christians hold dear, as important, as precious, we ought, in fact, be ashamed of and embarrassed about. What the Archbishop fails to realise is that the problem is not the Our Father. The problem is that the Archbishop *imagines* there is a problem. It is a fantasy. Those for whom it *might* be a problem just don't care what Stephen Cotterill thinks. But this will not slow down this movement to remove anything deemed awkward or exclusive.

In a couple of weeks, Lisbon in Portugal will welcome 100s of 1000s to World Youth Day, the largest regular gathering of Catholics in the world, and probably the largest youth event in the world. Well, an auxiliary (assistant) bishop of Lisbon in charge of World Youth Day (and this past week appointed cardinal) has said, 'We don't want to convert the young people to Christ or to the Catholic Church or anything like that at all.' Can you believe that a prince of the church would have the audacity and stupidity to say such a thing? For the cardinal-designate, the goal is to enable each young person to say, 'I think differently, I feel differently, I organize my life in a different way, but we are brothers and we go together to build the future.' The Bishop continued, 'We want it to be normal for a young Catholic Christian to say and bear witness to who he is or for a young Muslim, Jew, or of another religion to also have no problem saying who he is and bearing witness to it, and for a young person who has no religion to feel welcome and to perhaps not feel strange for thinking in a different way.' So, 'thinking differently' has a higher value than a living encounter with Christ. Diversity and inclusivity matter more than truth, matter even more than salvation. 'We don't want to convert the young people to Christ.' And with that, the greatest evangelical moment for their church has been lost!

Depressing examples to remind us what we are up against. But also to remind us that *God's thoughts are not our thoughts, his ways are not our ways*. And I propose them to you to *encourage* you in your faith. To encourage you to vigilance! In some circles, we would say these efforts to make the faith more easy and accessible in fact are just 'dumbing down' the faith. But it is in fact nothing less than *open surrender* to the world, and the abandonment of the Holy Spirit for the spirit of the age.

The well-known gospel parable placed before us today presents us with a sower liberally casting his seed. It is a sign of confidence, of hopeful expectation. Yes, some will be lost. But for there to be any hope at all, there must be seed to cast! A farmer who simply looks out to an empty field and merely *wishes* for something to grow *will not* be disappointed! But he will only have weeds! Evangelism is non-negotiable for Christians. The problem is that you can't plant and expect to grow what you do not have. And the research is very clear that most Christians today, especially young Christians, know very little about their faith. Something must be *offered* for it to be received. Something must be *given* for it to flourish and grow.

Elsewhere in the gospel of Matthew, Our Lord cautions against hurling pearls before swine, and to not give what is holy to dogs. In other words, *there are* exclusive claims in the gospel. Not everything is for everyone. There is a boundary and a parameter. There is a *credo*, a rule or measure by which our faith is lived out. The gospel account placed before us today would suggest that the 'flattening out' of the faith, is not really where it is at!

Now, we are doubtless familiar with the story. And the various aspects of the story seem logical. Indeed, we are given an interpretation of the parable by Our Lord himself. The account we hear today is in three parts. First the parable. The third part, the interpretation. And the middle, second part is a teaching on why Jesus employs parables. In this middle part there is a *distinction* – made by Jesus himself – between the disciples and the crowds. It is *the disciples* who have been given to know the 'mysteries of the kingdom'. Jesus says *they are revealed to you, but not to them*. That is, truth, life and insight does not come from within, and neither does it come from the world around us. They come by staying close to Jesus. In short, *discipleship and understanding go hand in hand*.

Efforts to make the faith more easy and accessible have only hollowed out the faith of meaning. Those who are embarrassed and apologetic about the faith and who undermine its exclusive claims would in fact seem to no longer believe the truth of Christ and his saving power. But it is by staying close to Jesus, following him, that we can hope for an abundant harvest. Only by faithful listening to him will we find true relevance. Amen.