

THE TWENTY FIRST SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME C (2019)

“Help us to seek the values that will bring us enduring joy in this changing world”

(Opening Prayer at Today’s Mass)

There is evidence everywhere of things changing rapidly, changes that can be very unsettling. We may feel very helpless in the face of what is going on in politics, and in social life, in the Church and even in sport. There is a massive accent on individualism and fear is being gestated by the unbridled pursuit of one’s own desires. We see it with the problem of recruiting police officers. Public appeals are made to respect the police who are so often under threat of assault. It is hard to keep teachers since discipline is strained to the point of danger. We are now experiencing it in the Church. Most believers in the West bemoan the shortage of priests, and the lack of vocations to the priestly and religious life. Those willing and able to keep going are overburdened often enough, and criticism of the bishops for amalgamations of parishes and the stress it puts on those priests still serving the parishes is serious. Then there is the polarisation that is constant, people dissatisfied with the liturgy they have got, and the desire to return to a type of liturgy once normal but now virtually unknown to people brought up in the faith since the end of Vatican II- after all that council ended in 1965. Those few of us who lived before and during the council have seen our contemporaries disappear because of age or for whatever other reasons. There is much to urge us to take very seriously the prayer at the opening of today’s Mass: make us one in mind and heart.

Today’s Scripture Readings

The first reading is from Isaiah- written all those years ago. It is a universal vision. And how unlikely it seemed that all the world would be coming to tiny Israel to make of all the nations a peaceful family of mankind. This was written during the Babylonian captivity (500 years before the coming of Christ). Our second reading is from the letter to the Hebrews, written to console Christians under pressure. It is very realistic, but perhaps in an idiom that not all would find congenial these days: parents punish their children to make them good. If the rod is spared the child is spoiled- only now it is God himself who is wielding the rod out of love for his errant children. It ends on a positive note: such punishment bears fruit in producing peace and goodness. One needs to be aware of the social context in which those lines were written. In a later world it would produce bitterness and alienation. When we get to the Gospel Jesus is seen to be warning and exhorting – warning against presumption. The context here could be a polemic against the Jews refusing the testimony of Jesus in contrast with the Old Testament saints who were looking forward to his coming and are now in the kingdom.

What Values Hold Us Together?

Each of us must have our own way of coping with the pressures that come upon us. We probably have our discipline and system that proves tried and true for us. In pride of place must always come personal relationships helped by prayer. Without assiduously cultivating the quality of life for our family and friends we are lost. I wonder if we all still recall how we were brought up if we were in a believing home and a Christian school. We began with the Morning Offering- that prayer of self dedication intended to guide us through the whole day. We were told that cleanliness was godliness. We were taught to say please and thanks for everything small and great. We were trained to share whatever we got, a virtue especially significant in war time when things were scarce. It meant cultivating the old fashioned virtues of kindness and respect in all our exchanges. We were taught not to tell lies, not to cheat in exams, not to belittle those who had less nor envy those who had more than ourselves. We were to be generous in our praise and sparing in our criticism. We prayed for the sick and the old.

All these sentiments we now find in Canon Four at Mass, exemplified in the life of Jesus. “He was a man like us in all things but sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation”- and the list follows- “to prisoners, freedom, and to those in sorrow, joy [...] He always loved his own in the world. When the time came for him to be glorified by you, his heavenly Father, he showed the depth of his love...’do this in memory of me” And after the consecration we pray: “Remember those for whom we offer this sacrifice. Those here present and all your people and all who seek you with a sincere heart. Remember those who have died in the peace of Christ.” Surely in our reciting these prayers together we are showing that we have one heart and one mind. They are a believing community commitment further to what we once recited as children at home and at the beginning of each school day. They are so down to earth, so simple, and exemplify a style of life that we want to honour. How important is the quality of human relationships expressed in them! That is what it is like to be a loveable human being in a united community.

Conclusion

We recall the words of Cardinal Newman who will be canonised a saint this October. What constitutes true happiness for human beings? he asked. "Not to know or to effect or to pursue, but to love, to hope, to joy, to admire, to revere, to adore." The essentials are here- as we make our pilgrim way. This does not mean that we do not have to embrace difficulties and sufferings. Not at all. But we are disposed as individuals and as community to help others on their pilgrim way too, and we confess our failings to God and to each other every time we celebrate Mass together.

A happy Sunday to you all.

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