

Homily for the Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) (8th August 2010)

Six weeks from now Pope Benedict will be with us in Britain. Of course, we don't know what he will choose to talk about on that visit, but I thought it might be a good idea over the next few weeks to look at some of the Pope's key ideas, some of the themes that occur again and again in his homilies and his letters. Most of us only hear very limited reports of what he says and does, filtered through what the media chooses to pass on to us, so I'm going to use the next few weeks to look at the words of the man himself. We will discover Pope Benedict as an Apostle of Love, because again and again he calls us to respond to the fact that we are deeply loved by becoming people of love, people who act out in our lives the great and generous gift of self which Jesus makes the mark of Christian life. We will also see him as a herald of hope in a world that so often seems to be sunk in despair, and as a prophet of joy. We might also explore his vision of Catholic liturgy and worship, but today we will begin with Benedict, witness to faith.

The passage from Hebrews that we heard today is almost a song in praise of faith. 'Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for'. Faith makes things happen. Because I have faith, I will dare to act, I will dare to do something difficult, something challenging. Abraham did not sit at home waiting for something to turn up; he packed his bags, followed God's call and set out to do something challenging, costly and difficult. Faith is the guarantee of the blessings we hope for because it is faith that drives us to act, drives us to take the risks that allow God to break through into our world.

One of the themes that Pope Benedict has returned to again and again on his travels has been the importance of faith. In particular he wants people to think about, and to understand more deeply, what it means to be a Catholic. He wants to break down some of the prejudices that we have so that we can rediscover with joy and with wonder what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. In particular he is adamant that 'Christianity, Catholicism, isn't a collection of prohibitions: it's a positive option'¹. Visiting the United States he urged people to overcome the idea that the Church is legalistic and institutional, and to focus on 'the joy born of faith and the experience of God's love'². Being a Catholic is not primarily about adopting a set of rules and regulations, like someone joining a club or a society. Being a Christian has nothing to do with learning a whole lot of facts, taking on a whole lot of information that is somehow external, apart from myself, separate from me. Being a Christian means meeting Jesus Christ, and allowing him to help me discover who and what I really am. Christianity gives us a unique and exclusive insight into what human beings really are. Because I am a follower of Jesus, I can discover what it really means to be human. Christ 'fully reveals man to man himself'³. As a follower of Jesus Christ I see more clearly the

¹ Interview with German broadcasters 2006

² Homily in St Patrick's Cathedral, New York 19/04/08

³ Gaudium et Spes n22

nature of human existence, and because of this insight I choose to act differently, I choose to act in a way that expresses more clearly my real nature.

Of course, for some of us this conversion is a struggle. We are frightened to open ourselves up to God. There are some aspects of our lives which we are reluctant to release. We know that they are damaging, or limiting, or self-indulgent, but we find it hard to let them go. We are, to some extent, happy to live imprisoned in a golden cage. Right at the beginning of his ministry as Pope, Benedict acknowledged this and challenged us to be courageous. He ended his inauguration homily with these words:

“And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life”.

The reality, the honest simple truth, is that in God we discover our true destiny. We sometimes imagine that if we turn away from him we can create ourselves as we choose, but this is simple fantasy. When we turn away from God we turn away from ourselves: ‘It is embrace, not escape, that we seek...the Holy Spirit gently but surely steers us back to what is real, what is lasting, what is true’⁴. Our Catholic faith gives us a very particular insight into the nature of human existence, on what it means to be a human being. That is why the Pope insists that Catholics must be involved in public life. There are plenty of people who would like to restrict religion to something private, to a pastime for people who like that sort of thing, a hobby like bird-watching or stamp-collecting. Religious beliefs, they say, should not be involved in law making or in public policy. But this is absurd, indeed it is unjust and inhuman. Our vision of what it means to be human is coherent, it is rational and it gives a solid ground for deciding how we should act. How can it be that other people should be able to force their idea of humanity on us, but that our vision must be kept secret, our tradition must be silenced? Catholicism cherishes faith, but it also embraces with enthusiasm reason – human discovery and thought, scientific exploration, all that the mind can achieve. It is all-embracing. Secularism, that rejects faith and pretends that reason alone will guide us, looks impoverished, narrow and sterile by contrast. Faith is not mere sentiment, about feelings and emotion, it presents a robust vision of what it means to be human, one which we must present again and again because so much public debate is based on different visions (or, indeed, on no coherent vision at all) of the meaning of human life⁵.

So, how can we summarise what Pope Benedict has to say about faith, about what it means to be Catholic?

We must take up ‘the challenge of recapturing the Catholic vision of reality and presenting it, in an engaging and imaginative way, to a society which markets any number of recipes for human fulfilment’⁶.

⁴ Vigil with Young People, Randwick Racecourse, Sydney, 19/07/08

⁵ Mass in Sydney Cathedral 19/07/08

⁶ Meeting with US Bishops 16/04/08

We must insist that freedom of religion doesn't just mean freedom to worship, but freedom to present our vision of humanity to the world, and to make that a part of public life. 'It is inconceivable ...that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens.'⁷

We must challenge people to have the courage to seek a more profound vision of human existence. 'Life is not just a succession of events or experiences...it is a search for the true, the good and the beautiful'.⁸

We must not allow God to be eclipsed because 'when God is eclipsed, our ability to recognize the natural order, purpose and the 'good' begins to wane'.⁹

We must be prepared to name and shame the false gods that lead people into a cycle of destructive self-obsession. 'False 'gods', whatever name, shape or form we give them, are nearly always associated with the worship of three things: material possessions, possessive love, or power.'¹⁰

The Pope will bring to Britain a wonderfully positive, liberating and empowering vision of the role of faith in daily life, and in public life. It is something we can look forward to with great excitement.

⁷ Address to UN General Assembly 18/04/08

⁸ Welcome celebration, Bangaroo, Australia, 17/07/08

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Meeting with disadvantaged young people, Sydney, 18/07/08