

## Homily for The Second Sunday of Lent (Year C)(28/02/2010)

Last week I ended by suggesting to you that we have grown very familiar with what the Church is all about, or at least what we think it is all about, and so we have lost sight of just how radical the gospel is. In fact, the image of the Church that lots of people have is simply wrong. Too often we allow other people to set the agenda, and people outside the Church, people who are often very critical of us, are the ones telling us what the Church believes, and if we are not careful we half believe them. So people tell us the Church discriminates against women; no it doesn't. People tell us the church hates gay people; no it doesn't. People tell us the Church fights against science; no it doesn't. It's time for us to take back control, for us to say to people who try to undermine us, don't you tell me what the Church is all about, listen a minute and let me tell you.

Today I want to look at the radical nature of the Christian gospel, and see just what a difference it has made in the world, and what a difference it can make. First of all, I want to repeat two important things to remember. First, let's admit that individual Christians have done plenty of bad things, and so have Christian leaders, especially when they've got too close to secular power. Second, since the Reformation there has been a concerted effort to embed within British culture an anti-catholic prejudice, which makes it difficult for us to take at face value everything that has been written by historians and commentators; if you doubt that, just ask yourselves which religious faiths are officially discriminated against in our constitution - there is only one. Bearing those in mind, let's go back to the early days of the Church.

Many of us will have grown up with a rather romanticised idea of the ancient world. We will be well aware of the cultural achievements of ancient Greece and Rome. We may even have been sold a story which tells us that learning and culture were thriving in the ancient world until the Christians came along and stamped on all the fun and the knowledge, leading to a thousand years or more of misery before enlightened scientists and thinkers came along to set the world free from the dead hand of religion. The truth is rather more complex. Most history is the story of the rich and the powerful, and for all that we know of Greek and Roman culture there is also a shadowy world of poverty, slavery and misery. The distinguishing feature of the ancient world could be said to be the fact that life was cheap. The revolutionary central feature of Christianity was the fact that life is *not* cheap, it is anything but. Every single human being is infinitely precious, being made in the image and likeness of God, and is destined for glory. It was this vision of humanity that marked Christianity out as so very different, and it was this idea which turned the ancient world order upside down. This new faith, based on the shameful and humiliating death of a single person, subsequently exalted by God, threatened to destroy the very fabric of society. It was deeply shocking for Paul to write that, because of their common baptism, 'there can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female' (Gal. 3.28). There were to be no separate Temples for the rich and the poor, or for the different races, all were to worship the one God together. For a rigidly hierarchical society this was frightening.

The effect of Christianity's fundamental belief, which is really a quite distinct view of human nature, that everyone is precious and made in God's image, was to make a radical sense of solidarity and charity of vital importance. There had been a concept

of charity in the ancient world, but it tended to be based on maintaining the social hierarchy; the powerful gave to the poor to show how gracious and dignified they were, and to maintain their popularity; the Christian cared for the poor because they were his brothers and sisters, and in caring for the poor they were caring for God himself. What really disturbed the leaders of the old world order was the fact that the Christians were positively wasteful in their concern for every human person. The Emperor Julian wrote to a pagan priest 'It is a disgrace that these impious Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well' (Epistle 22). Early Christianity smashed the strict social hierarchy of the ancient world. If it was itself then tamed by being made a part of the Roman Empire, this is not an indication that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, but that it has not really been tried in all its richness. However, the central idea that all people have an equal and exalted dignity spread quickly throughout the known world as Christianity itself spread. This was why Christian faith set about spreading hospitals and almshouses; care for the poor and the sick was essential to the faith, and if these values have found their way into our own society they have done so because of Christian faith. More than this, it was the central Christian belief that every human being is infinitely precious that lies behind the whole idea of protecting human rights; it is also the driving force behind universal education. So much that we take for granted in our society stems directly from the fundamental Christian 'big idea'.

Last week I promised an answer to the question 'what is the Church for?' The question could be answered in lots of ways and on lots of levels, but based on this concept of every person being precious and made in God's image I think the simplest answer would be 'setting people free'. That is certainly how I would sum up my role as a priest. Every one of us is made to be free, but so many things (including ourselves) conspire to make us slaves. The Church's role is to show us our chains, then show us how they can be broken. What is the fundamental story of the Old Testament? It is the Exodus, the people of Israel being led out of slavery into freedom. What is the fundamental story of the New Testament? It is the death and Resurrection of Christ. Human sinfulness puts him to death, but by the power of God he is set free from death and raised to life. Deep within the heart of God is this longing that we might be free, and it is the Church's job to act on that. Some people are enslaved by a sense of isolation, or of being worthless, and we offer them freedom as brothers and sisters of Christ with us, come and join us, you belong here whoever you are; others are enslaved by hopelessness, and we offer them hope; others are enslaved by anger, or pride, and we can help them break free; others are enslaved by obsessive or destructive behaviour, and we can show them a way to make a new start and take control of their lives. If you want to find someone who knows what it is really like to be free, read the lives of the saints.

I need to say something briefly about the nature of freedom here, because people do understand this word in different ways. For many people today, freedom means 'no-one will stop me doing what I want to do'. But that is not freedom, it simply ensures that I become the slave of my passions and my desires. It is a child's idea of freedom - I want the sweets, and I want them now. What freedom really means is 'no-one will stop me doing what I *ought* to do'. This is adult freedom: I want to have this but I know it will harm me, so no-one can make me have it; or, I will do things that might be uncomfortable or inconvenient to me because, in the long run, they are the right thing to do.

Nothing is more guaranteed to irritate an atheist than a quotation from Dostoevsky's murderer in *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'If there's no everlasting God there's no such thing as virtue'. They squeal and point out that there are many good atheists, and many bad Christians. No doubt this is true. But every true human virtue is to be found in Christian teaching, and even those atheists who most strongly reject Christianity have grown up in a culture that is so strongly influenced by its historic Christian culture that they cannot help being infected with its ideas. This is a really important point. Many of the values that atheists claim are just human values, in fact came from the Church, from us. They are based on this principle, which the world did not know before Christianity, that every person is infinitely precious and destined for glory. This idea has been sown so successfully by Christianity in our society that lots of people don't even realise where it has come from. However much they try and persuade us that there are Darwinian evolutionary advantages to altruism and charity, the fact remains that the self-sacrifice of countless holy people to protect the weak brings them no personal advantage, nor any advantage to the human race as a whole. It is simply motivated by that big idea, that the people in front of them are made in God's image and are precious. So, where do people get their morality from if it is not from their faith? If the answer is from their parents, well where did they get it from? If the answer is school, well where did school get it from? If the answer is the state, the law, what guarantee is there that the state knows best - and where did the lawmakers get their morality from? If the answer is 'common sense' well it is remarkable how uncommon that is, and how many foolish things have been done in the name of common sense. How do people know what is right and what is wrong, what should be pursued and what should be avoided? As long as there is a vestige of Christian history in society, we may be ok, but if that disappears won't morality simply become another arena where the strong impose their will on the weak? Could we ever come up with a man-made morality that was anything other than 'every man for himself'? If you don't like the Dostoevsky quote, here is another from Jung Chang: 'If you have no God, your moral Code is that of society. If society is turned upside down, so is your moral code.' (Independent on Sunday 10 Sept 1995).

Finally, what do we say when people challenge us about our morality. The man in the pub says 'I'm a better man than you Catholics, because I do what I do out of conviction, everything I do is my own choice, but you just do what the Pope tells you, whether you think it is right or not'. Leaving aside how well informed his own choices may really be, this comment betrays a total failure to understand Catholic morality. Our vision of what is right and wrong is not just some arbitrary set of rules and regulations that someone has dreamed up and imposed on us from outside. Catholic morality is firmly based on real human nature: if we are told something is wrong, that is because it will harm us; if we are told something is good, it is because it will help us flourish. So, as Alban McCoy paraphrases Aquinas, 'God is not offended by anything we do except those things that harm us' (*An Intelligent Person's Guide to Catholicism* 68).

#### Some points for reflection/discussion

Do we really know what the Catholic Church teaches about key issues? Where do we get our understanding of the Catholic faith from?

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Every person is infinitely precious, made in the image and likeness of God, and is destined for glory. If we really believe this, what difference will it make to the way we act?

The point of The Church is to set people free. What might this mean in practice? Does it help us answer our critics?

How do people outside The Church decide what is right and what is wrong?

'God is not offended by anything we do except those things that harm us'. This is a key point. How do we bring this into our discussion with other people?