

Sunday Homily

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

4 JULY 2021

YEAR B

"So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent."

Mark 6:12

Illustration

When it comes to sport, the home team is agreed to have the upper hand in any match. There will be more locals in the crowd, willing them on, cheering their attacks, celebrating every point scored and commiserating with their misfortunes. Travelling to another team's ground may prove to be a rather less comfortable experience, for there the crowd will probably be indifferent, at best, to the players' efforts, while at home the majority are right behind them. It's a different matter when the name of the game is "imparting a message". Instead of cheering on one of their own, the crowd may well turn on them.

Gospel Teaching

This is precisely the situation in which Jesus found himself. The problem was, he could not deliver only messages the crowd wanted to hear – it was as though he was scoring goals for the other side. No matter if his genius was still obvious in the manoeuvres he executed, what he was doing was not what the many desired or expected – their minds were narrowed by habit and prejudice. For this reason Jesus achieved little in the way of miraculous works on home territory: the conditions were simply not favourable. His fellow townspeople were too affronted by his presumptuousness to be receptive to any works of power he might perform in their community. The problem with prophets, which you never find in sporting heroes, was that they would insist on challenging the audience; the crowd's response was more important than the action.

Voicing a familiar proverb, Jesus notes the impossibility of being an honoured prophet among one's own people, and, consequently, he adopts a different strategy in commissioning the disciples for their prophetic and pastoral ministry. He sends them out, to places where they are literally and metaphorically unencumbered by baggage, although not entirely alone. The reaction of the hearers elsewhere should be less prejudiced by familiarity – the disciples will play on a "level field". The message itself is all-important, and the Lord wants it to be plain, undisguised by the livery or identity of its presenters.

Application

As we think about this story, should we perhaps consider where we are when the Lord's message is spoken to us? Are we at the "home" or "away" ground? Too often we tend to become the insiders, the partisan crowd. Many of us have grown up with Jesus and he – and his disciples – have almost become "ours": the domesticated home team. They are at our disposal, their job is to please us and not challenge us, their targets should be the "outsiders" rather than us. The more we hear the words of scripture, the more we become comfortable with what they say: we practically know Jesus too well. So we must try to be foreigners in our listening, to hear the Gospel as if it were new every time.

Initiating a response in their audience was what the disciples, John the Baptist and the Old Testament prophets had in common with Jesus. Their vital proclamation was enhanced by plainness and strangeness, it was not the crowd-pleasing of the home team, but a stark wake-up call from somewhere else. Yet it is not only a change of heart which is required of those who hear the Gospel. For we are less obviously challenged in turn to bear the message ourselves, like the disciples, without baggage or additional protection: we too must carry the kingdom abroad.

You may be thinking that you couldn't possibly be a prophet, standing up and speaking out; or the kind of travelling preachers or healers that the apostles were, let alone another John crying in the wilderness, a Paul or even an Ezekiel, but you can. For there are two fundamental elements which are essential to Christian discipleship: how you pray and how you live.

Through diligent prayer you may become attuned to the words and ways of God. Then perhaps you may adopt values and behaviour somewhat different from those of your immediate neighbours. Thus your whole life can become part of God's message and you will find that you make a difference simply by being "on the pitch", both home and away, without ever resorting to your soapbox! Essentially re-evaluating your life in the alien light of Jesus' teaching, and changing your ways accordingly, amounts to "repentance" and, by thoughtful living, you will be proclaiming his teaching to others.

Sunday Homily

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

11 JULY 2021

YEAR B

“Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man...
When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed.”

Mark 6:20

Illustration

Imagine you are in the supermarket, doing your weekly shop on a busy Saturday morning. As you reach second place in the queue, the unremarkable person in front of you starts ripping the packaging off all the things in their trolley and throwing it in a heap on the floor. As they begin loading their undressed purchases onto the conveyor belt, they also start to proclaim loudly the dreadful wastefulness of our society. “All these plastic containers are made with oil we cannot spare; they will pollute the ground for centuries; and all this time God’s precious children are lost and starving. I want the food, but not the packaging; you are killing our planet and all you care about is making money, no matter who gets hurt.”

It’s not just embarrassing and disruptive; it makes you uncomfortable. Your trolley suddenly seems full of packaging, too. You look anxiously for another checkout; you try to stand apart from the rumpus. Then the manager appears, and the security staff; they manhandle the miscreant out of the way and try to clear up the mess.

Gospel Teaching

Herod may have had similar feelings about John the Baptist. He was torn between the position of the supermarket manager and the discomfited fellow-shopper. In a position of authority he could not allow John to damage his reputation. He has vested interests in the way that things are, whether he thinks John is right or not. Then again, despite his sneaking suspicion that John may have God on his side, he realises that his own behaviour cannot escape John’s criticism. He personally has too much to lose from sparing the Baptist. He has the power to silence John’s protests and lets himself be forced into doing so by someone who is more resentful and less scrupulous.

Mark, by careful ordering of his material, hints that the same fate awaits Jesus, who has still greater authority than John, the prophet who has prepared his way. The people are too stubborn and self-willed to listen to the voice of God. They are too preoccupied with worldly matters and self-interest to repent. Changing their mind about past and present behaviour would be humiliating – there is simply too much to lose. So the uncomfortable disturbances must be silenced.

Application

The prophets who revealed God's insight into contemporary behaviour were members of a long tradition in ancient Israel. They were rarely welcomed, not only because their behaviour was often bizarre, but because people did not want to hear the truth. Yet with the benefit of hindsight their message was better understood, their divine inspiration perceived and their words respected.

As Christians we are called both to heed the voice of the prophets and to be like them – speaking out for God. It is not a prospect we relish because it may make us stand out in ways we will find uncomfortable. Influenced by our liberal, rights-orientated times, perhaps we are more prepared to tolerate what is clearly unacceptable. But, like the uncomfortable shopper, we sometimes recognise underlying issues and know we should not remain silent.

Yet we are not alone in our calling: being a Christian is not so much about lone voices crying in the wilderness, as being a God-centred community. We can choose to live according to different values from the rest of the world. To do this we must be self-aware and honest about our own behaviour. We must pray: always seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit when faced with moral dilemmas. We must use well the rich resources of scripture, tradition and reason. We must think carefully about the issues which face humanity and we must do our best to agree on ways to respond. We should be prepared to change our minds and our behaviour, and not afraid of ridicule or criticism.

It seems far simpler to keep well away from people who make a scene, however much we secretly admire their motives. Yet apathy and inaction may have been just as crucial in bringing John and Jesus to their deaths as aggression and fear. If we do not have the "gift of prophecy" ourselves – the insight and ability to communicate – perhaps, as Christ's body on earth, we should associate ourselves with those who do. For only with our active participation can the kingdom of God be realised.

Sunday Homily

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

18 JULY 2021

YEAR B

"He had compassion for them, because they were
like sheep without a shepherd."

Mark 6:34

Illustration

This is the age of the expert. And television has been responsible for a whole new breed of them: the armchair expert. Whether it is the couch potato who can see exactly where the professional footballer is going wrong, or the viewer who criticises the TV chef's technique, we probably all know an armchair expert. Armchair experts are very good on the theory, but never put it into practice. They remain in front of the television set, pontificating, while the real expert gets on with the job.

A similar phenomenon occurs in churches, if people confine their Christianity to Sunday worship. How many of us are guilty, from time to time, of joining together in the familiar words of creeds or hymns, but not taking that message out into the rest of the week and the rest of the world? And we all know people who can quote scripture, but seem to have missed the practical application of it. Sunday Christians are pew experts and, like armchair experts, rarely practise what they preach.

Gospel Teaching

Today's Gospel reading illustrates that Christianity demands practice as well as theory. The apostles, returning from their mission, report "all that they had done and taught". Their mission of teaching and healing mirrors that of Jesus himself. Here Jesus teaches the crowd many things and heals their sick friends and relatives. In the verses omitted from today's reading, Jesus feeds the five thousand: another very practical outworking of his compassion for "sheep without a shepherd".

The image of Jesus as Good Shepherd, occurring throughout the New Testament, continues an Old Testament theme depicting God in these terms. Just as Jesus entrusts this task to his followers, to share in his own role as shepherd of the people, so in the Old Testament the leaders of Israel are described as shepherds. It is no accident that both Moses and David actually were shepherds.

An armchair shepherd is of no use to the sheep; shepherds need to be with their sheep, to protect them from harm and lead them in the right direction. Biblical images of shepherds leading their flock contrast with the modern British image

of walking behind them with a border collie, but in biblical times a shepherd needed to go first into dangerous situations. Instead of our own rural idyll of green pastures and rolling hills, biblical shepherds were faced with craggy outcrops and ravening wolves. Today's shepherds in Britain return to a warm bed each night; biblical shepherds slept with their flocks, ready to act if danger threatened.

Jesus, God with us, lived with his flock. He did not preach the kingdom of God during the day and retreat to a heavenly palace at night. He did not set up a permanent pulpit in temple or synagogue, or restrict his teaching ministry to the sabbath, but combined his teaching with practical demonstration of it, out in the everyday world. Like a good shepherd he was prepared to risk his life for his sheep, and in the Eucharist especially we recall how he sacrificed himself to save us from the sin that preys on us. Jesus practised what he preached, and he sent his followers to do likewise.

Application

Like the first disciples, we are sent to continue Jesus' mission in the world: a mission that involves theory and practice, faith and works, evangelism and pastoral care. These elements of Christianity must not be separated if we are to remain faithful to the example Jesus himself set us. The very word "pastoral" comes from the word for a shepherd, and it is often used to distinguish practical Christian ministry, the service of others, from what is seen as a higher calling: evangelism. If we remember that the Good Shepherd himself combined teaching and doing, we will not fall into that trap.

We can carry our faith out into the world, in ways that are best suited to our own gifts and situations. Some are ambitious community projects, others are much simpler: visiting, helping and praying for others. Whatever form it takes, practical support of others, when carried out in the name of Jesus Christ, is effective evangelism. Sunday Christianity, unaccompanied by compassion in action, is no better than the ranting of the armchair expert.

Sunday Homily

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

25 JULY 2021

YEAR B

"He looked up and saw a large crowd
coming towards him."

John 6:5

Illustration

Towards the end of the film of *The Railway Children*, from the book written in 1906, by Edith Nesbit, the young people hurry through the countryside to the railway station, wondering at some momentous event which they suspect is in the offing. When the train comes to a standstill, through the steam issuing from the engine, they see a figure standing alone. Roberta, the eldest child, can hardly believe her eyes. After all this long time without him... there he is... she hurls herself along the platform shouting, "Daddy...!" All her dreams had come to fruition, her faith rewarded, all her anxieties could be put aside. There he was, at last, her Daddy. No more need to worry about him and his fate, and their family's future. They would be together again. Her mother would no longer be lonely, the little children no longer lost without him and Roberta herself would feel secure. Daddy would make their lives complete, he would ensure that they never went hungry again and fill the empty space that his absence had created in their hearts and in their lives. In spite of his long absence, he had not forgotten them.

Gospel Teaching

The people of Israel longed for the Messiah to come, but expected only prophets, because they were all that God had sent to them so far. But how could the Messiah come when the Romans inhabited the land God had given them? Elisha had provided for God's people through miraculous actions. Numerous other prophets had drawn the people back to God when other diversions had arisen and they had taken other paths, mostly leading to conflict and pain. In this period of cruel occupation people had run to John the Baptist for reassurance and evidence that God had not forgotten his people, but then John was killed.

To whom could they turn, but to the man who seemed so much more than just another prophet? Here was one who could rescue the diseased from their ailments, who offered reassurance of God's love for them and security to those rejected by the religious authorities as unfit for Temple worship. And Jesus fed them. He fed their minds with the truth, fed their hearts with the compassion he preached and lived, and fed their bodies with nourishment created by a miracle.

They ran to this man expecting a prophet as of old but, because they were prepared to believe, they received the gifts which only God could give them. This was the God whom Jesus referred to as his Father, and who then proved through Jesus that he was indeed the Father of all. Later, with his friends, Jesus would also demonstrate his power over the elements of water, time and space, but the crowd would not be present then. But for the time being they had received what they needed: the reassurance that, in spite of all that had gone before and the present burden of foreign invasion, God had not forgotten them. Their continuing faith had brought this man to them and his availability to them in their dire need was their proof.

Application

Where do we find our comfort, our reassurance, in these days of increasing secularism and continuing conflict? We now know more about God than the crowds fed by Jesus because our knowledge is filtered through the wonder of the resurrection. We know what God is really like because Jesus told us and showed the extent of God's love for us in all of his actions. Jesus told us to call his Father "Abba", which means "Daddy". No longer is God to be the stern and authoritarian patriarch of the ancient times, one who filled the world with awe and anxiety. God became the Father upon whose knee the insecure might find comfort, the weary would find rest and the hungry would be fed from his hand. While remaining the Lord of all creation, in majesty and power, God demonstrated a loving parenthood more encompassing than anything we could even imagine, bending to earth to nurture the little and the lost and give hope to all who turn their faces heavenwards.

Since Jesus, we are no longer alone. Our strength comes not only from bread, hope and guesswork. We have seen the face of God, and the actions of the Almighty, in the person of Jesus. To know him is to know the extent of God, to have the totality of God and the kingdom of heaven among us.