

Homily for the Third Sunday of Lent 2021 Year B

‘He never needed evidence about any man, He could see what a man had in him.

In the early church, a large number of men and women, known as the ‘Desert Mothers and Fathers, sought solitude and silence in those remote places, seeking to simply purify their lives and grow in spiritual virtue. One of these virtues was called ‘purity of heart’, the ability to look at things with clear sightedness, to pierce the subtle veils of deceptiveness and to try and see things as they really truly are.

The Gospels show us that Christ had this ability and today's gospel confirms it.

This side of eternity we try to live what are called religious lives. Religion is that system whereby God reveals himself to man, and through which, man approaches God through lives of goodness, prayer and worship. But we have to learn that through painful experience, because human nature is flawed and imperfect, there is good religion and bad religion.

God Himself is always utterly consistent in His Holiness, Beauty and Truth, but how we understand Him and what He wills of us is sometimes deeply flawed and mistaken, because we are human and we make mistakes, or worse, because we are malicious and evil.

Isn't that a shocking thing to say, that there are people who are malicious and evil? As a religious person, something inside me makes me want to recoil from making judgments like that, to admit that there are people like that.

We will fuss and fudge and find a dozen excuses to qualify and water down that statement, rather than first come out and speak the truth as we see it. Religious sensitivity makes us hesitate in the face of such a truth.

That dilemma provides us with the perfect example of what might constitute good religion and bad religion. And it's important to know the difference because it's hard enough to live a good, moral, religious life without finding out that there's something flawed about my religious principles.

In simple terms good religion would allow me to say such a thing as that there are some malicious and evil people, and feel comfortable about saying it. Bad religion would make me feel very uncomfortable about it, guilty and ill at ease, even though the facts might be staring me in the face.

Religion is bad if it makes me soft hearted, and soft headed to the degree that I cannot or will not acknowledge the truth of a matter, even though the plain evidence is there in front of me.

Religion is good if it can provide me with both the confidence and the courage to seek truth and then to proclaim it and live it.

Now our powers of judgement are far from infallible and we can make and do all sorts of mistakes, but if my religious upbringing inhibits me from making a judgement, if it has become my first instinct to abdicate responsibility to use the intelligence that God has given me, then I am involved in bad religion.

And when I speak here about making a judgement, I am not referring to that sort of moral judgement where I condemn somebody, I simply mean making a decision to acknowledge the truth of the matter that I see before me.

The whole point about a moral code like the 10 Commandments, that we hear in the first reading, is not to repress us into unthinking and fearful obedience. The point of a moral code is to make us into moral people, that is, mature people who can see, think, judge and freely act for themselves, and live by the consequences of the moral choices that we make in the sight of Almighty God. To stand on our own two feet before God.

Now bad religion takes away that healthy autonomy. Worse still we can timidly hide behind it and allow it to make all our choices for us. We behave in this or that way because our religion tells us to, instead of behaving in that way because we understand why our religion tells us to.

Bad religion encourages the lazy habit of blind obedience.

It's obedience, yes, but nevertheless, it's still blind, and that sort of moral blindness does not give honour and glory to God. We diminish ourselves when we abdicate full personal responsibility for our choices and actions.

Religion can become a very dangerous thing when it shapes and forms a person to wallow in sentimentality and soft headedness, to the degree that they cannot acknowledge the real evil in that person standing in front of them. Instead, it is seen as exercising the virtue of charity and kindness of heart to

seek to excuse or explain away to oneself, or to others, the truth of the matter that stares them in the face. How on earth can you even begin to help the problematic evil person or situation that confronts you, if you at the very first stage deliberately choose not to see the problem, the evil that is there.

God is not fooled and we don't really fool ourselves.

It takes great moral courage to face a particular truth when it is staring you in the face, because once you acknowledge it, you may have to change your life. Far too often we pretend to ourselves that we haven't seen it and we look away. It may well be that there are ingrained habits in my life that need to be changed - I see the truth of that - but I am not prepared to change them. As a moral person I have the freedom to make that choice, but also as a moral person I am accountable for that choice.

A perceived truth always makes demands upon me to acknowledge its truthfulness. Bad religion allows me to water it down, obscure or fudge it. Good religion will always make me feel uncomfortable about that if I start to play that game.

So there perhaps is a task for this Lent. Do I have the clear sightedness of Christ in my own personal life? Can I cut through all the sham and subtle deceptiveness that I practise upon myself because I'm afraid of the demands that that truth will make up on me? Or do I still play all those pointless mind games of moral hide and seek between God and myself, using bad religion to justify my moral cowardice?

If it's that latter state of affairs that's true, then as a moral person it's time I changed, it's time I did something about it.

'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God'.