

Homily for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021 Year B

Do you ever watch people's faces in the streets, on the buses or on the tube? If you do, you will know what St Mark means about "that harassed look" that caught the compassion of Christ.

For the most part, people are weighed down by a myriad number of problems that are part and parcel of just surviving in everyday life. The burden of that stress shows in their faces and in the way they carry themselves. What is true of daily life also rings true in their Church life, their religious life, and their life of faith.

Sheep without a shepherd are lost. They wander aimlessly all over the place, even into situations of extreme danger, just longing to hear their familiar shepherd's voice that will lead them to safety. For many people living within the Church for the past 30 to 40 years have been a little like that. The certitude and the security it offered, that they had grown up with, has all but disappeared. Familiar expressions like "Mother Church" expressed that comfortable relationship, but an explosion of change in liturgical worship, and devotional practises, and open debate upon Church teaching and theological topics, often resulted in a painful and confused state as to what the Church stood for, believed in, and taught. Was it even the same Church?

For many people, trying to live fully and faithfully as a member of the Church, a comfortable and comforting Church, changed into what was often a very lonely place indeed.

Today's Gospel also speaks of a lonely place, but not as cause of peoples' harassment, but rather as a cure for peoples' harassment. Is there a lesson in that for us? I think that we first need to distinguish between a lonely place and loneliness.

Nobody wants to be lonely. It is too painful an experience. But to be in a lonely place and experience solitude is not the same thing.

Christ often sought solitude in order to pray. As we heard in the gospel, Christ led His friends out into a lonely place to refresh them. So too finding ourselves in a state of solitude can be a great grace from God. A gift from God.

There are all sorts of situations and circumstances in our lives where we can find ourselves in a very lonely place indeed: for example, personal relationships, or matters of religious belief. It is a terrible moment when, for whatever reason, all that was safe, secure, supportive, familiar, and reliable, dissolves and disappears. And what follows is a profound sense of being on one's own.

The thing to do is not to panic. Try and see that experience of solitude, being in a lonely place as full of potential creativity. The early Christians had no trouble seeing that. They valued highly what was called the "desert experience". They deliberately sought this solitude. They travelled out to those isolated, lonely places to be alone.

And in those lonely places, stripped of all comfort and consolation, that experience of solitude allowed them to practise the virtue of "purity of heart".

Purity of heart was to achieve a degree of clear sightedness. To be able to cut through the layers of complications and confusions that often surround an issue, situation, problem or idea and be able to see it clearly as it really is.

Solitude, being in a lonely place, creates the conditions that make that clarity of vision possible. Remember Christ words in the Sermon of the Mount? "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". When we do see God, all that obscures him in our lives will have been removed. Our hearts will be pure, our vision clear and direct.

So, if in your faith or your spiritual life you sometimes find yourself in a very lonely place, it may express itself as deep doubt, darkness, confusion or despair. Forget for a moment the pain of what is harassing you and try to see that the loneliness of that situation has at one-and-the same time stripped away some of the comforting, but non-essential aspects of your faith, to create the conditions for a clearer vision and understanding of God. A state of solitude, be that physical or emotional solitude, can concentrate the mind wonderfully. It creates the conditions that dares us to cross the abyss that separates us from our real selves. In a religious context, to come to a lonely place is most certainly not to be alone. Rather, it is always to enter a state open to a purer, more intense experience of the presence of God. God leads us there. It is His gift to us.