

Homily for Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time
Fr Shaun's Preaching Series - *The Sunday Experience* - Part III - Homilies

"Shaun, you should be a priest"! Friends and colleagues were saying that to me from the time I was about 17 years old. At one level, I can understand why. I was very, very actively involved in my local parish, but at that time, even the *idea* of standing in front of a church full of people, doing what I'm doing now - preaching a homily - filled me with absolute terror!

Today is the third and final homily in my preaching series, *The Sunday Experience*. As we think about parish renewal, we need to invest time & energy into working on the quality of the Sunday experience of Mass. How *accessible* is it? How *engaging*? How *joyful*?

During this preaching series, I'm exploring what Fr James Mallon, in his book *Divine Renovation*, calls the Three Hs: *Hymns, Hospitality, & Homilies*. Two Sundays ago, I spoke about the importance of hymn-singing and church music generally to the quality of our Sunday Experience. I explained how at the 6 pm Mass, we'll now sing hymns; how at the 9 am Mass, we're looking to boost the numbers singing in the choir & at ways the choir can help to bolster the congregational singing of hymns, & how at the 11 am Mass - from Advent the singing will be lead from the front of the church & that at that Mass we'll be introducing contemporary Praise and Worship songs.

Last weekend, I spoke about the importance of offering radical, intentional hospitality, especially to newcomers. I explained that hospitality is the responsibility of the whole parish community, not just the Welcomers at the door. And I introduced *Prayer Partners* and, today, *Name Tag Sunday* as small but important symbols of our desire to be a Church where people are known by name!

I spoke both weekends about my desire to install LED screens on either side of the church, on which we can display hymn lyrics & the prayers of the Mass, & how this can open up a new ministry of service for our teenagers and make our celebration of Mass more accessible to newcomers and those without much experience of attending Mass.

This weekend, I'm addressing the third H - Homilies. It seems strange to be preaching a homily about homilies, but I think it's essential to do so. Because, just like hymns and hospitality, homilies have an important part to play in how engaging, how accessible, and how joyful our Sunday Experience of Mass is. Let me begin by saying a brief further word about the LED screens. When (and it will be when, not if) we get the screens, which I hope will be sometime next year, after a bit of fundraising, I intend to use the screens to show some slides to illustrate my homily. We live in an image-driven society. A picture, with or without a few words, can reinforce a message and make it memorable for people in a way that leads to action.

For Pope Francis places, the Sunday homily is so important that he devotes some 22 paragraphs of his Apostolic Letter on Evangelisation: *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)* to this very subject. He says that the homily is the '*touchstone for judging a pastor's closeness and ability to communicate to his people.*' He says that he knows that the faithful attach great importance to it - and he goes on to make what's probably the first ever Papal joke in an official Vatican document when he says: "*both [the faithful] and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the clergy from having to preach them and the laity from having to listen to them!*" Actually, I reversed the order; the Pope said it the other way around, but I think this way round is even funnier.

The Pope goes on to say that the preacher has to know the heart of his community; where its desire for God is alive and ardent, but also where that desire for God has maybe gone a bit cold and needs renewal. He sees the purpose of preaching as guiding "*the assembly and the preacher, to a*

life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist.” “The preacher”, he says, “has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people.”

Pope Francis also offers the preacher some salient words about the importance of proper preparation: *‘A preacher who does not prepare is not “spiritual”; he is dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received.’*

I’ve been preaching at Mass since I was ordained as a deacon in the year 2000. My preaching, like other aspects of my priesthood, has developed and matured over the years. I’d like to think that I’m a better preacher now than I was when I was first ordained. Obviously, you can’t really be judges of that, as you never heard my early efforts! I’m grateful to those of you who sometimes tell me that my homily has been helpful to you in some way. Not because I’m looking for praise or validation but because I genuinely want my homilies to speak into the reality of your lives.

I think my preaching has generally improved over the years, but never more so since I read Fr James Mallon’s book, *Divine Renovation*. For those of you who’ve read it or are reading it, you’ll know he has a lot to say about the place of the homily in Mass. What reading *Divine Renovation* has helped me to do is to see that the purpose of preaching is to enable mission. This is something that Fr. James speaks about in the Foreword to a book called *Preaching on Purpose: A Divine Renovation Handbook for communicating the Gospel Today*. In that Foreword, Fr. James speaks about *‘the need for strategic preaching that pierces hearts, inspires personal conversion to Jesus, unleashes missionary disciples, and helps the entire parish break out of maintenance to ignite the world through the power of the Gospel.’* Right ... now, the 17-year-old me is really terrified. That’s a pretty daunting to-do list!

So, what do I want you to know? I want you to know that I’m trying each week to become a better preacher. Despite all the many other things that land on my desk and in my email box each day, I’m determined to find quality time each week to pray with the scriptures for the coming Sunday, and to devote as much time as possible to preparing my homily. I want you to know that each Sunday, during the readings of Mass, I’m sitting over there, praying: *“Come, Holy Spirit; Come, Holy Spirit.”* Asking the Holy Spirit to help me preach to the best of my ability, that *through* my preaching, hearts might be pierced, personal conversion to Jesus might be inspired, missionary disciples might be unleashed, and that my preaching might, by God’s grace, help the entire parish break out of maintenance to ignite the world through the power of the Gospel.

So, I’ve said what I want you to know. But what do I want you to do? I want you to please pray for me! Please pray for me during the week, that the Lord will inspire me with the right message to share with you. And please pray for me, maybe in those moments between when I finish reading the Gospel and I’m moving from the pulpit to here – that the Holy Spirit will help me preach powerfully and well – for the glory of God and the spiritual good of you, his precious children.

St Paul, that great preacher to the Gentiles, concludes the portion of his First Letter to the Thessalonians, which we hear today as our second reading today, with these words:

Another reason why we constantly thank God for you is that as soon as you heard the message that we brought you as God’s message, you accepted it for what it really is, God’s message and not some human thinking; and it is still a living power among you who believe it.

What Paul is speaking about is the power and importance of the Word of God in the preaching and teaching of the Gospel. It highlights that the message, the message I have the privilege and

awesome responsibility of sharing with you Sunday by Sunday, isn't merely a human invention but is the very word of God. When people receive this message with faith, it has a transformative effect on their lives, actively working within them.

So, I pray that I, and every preacher, may approach the task of preaching the Sunday homily with the importance and reverence that it deserves - with love, with selflessness, and with authenticity - always acknowledging the transformative power of the word of God when it's received in faith, always remembering the significance of both the message and the manner in which it's delivered.