

HOMILY SUNDAY 18TH OCTOBER 2020

Dear Friends,

I sometimes talk to parents who are upset because their children, whom they brought up in the practice of the faith, have turned against it. They no longer go to Mass and have nothing to do with the Church any more. This can be acutely distressing for parents and make them think they have failed and not brought their children up properly.

I have noticed, however, that they will nearly always say, of a daughter for instance, '*But* she is a very good person. She is kind and considerate, she looks after her family well, she is always ready to do anyone a good turn.' This makes want to say that they must have done a good job as parents and although the daughter seems to have turned away from God, God has certainly not turned away from her. He is still there, still moving in her. *Ubi caritas et amor, ibi Deus est* - where there is love, there is God. It really as simple as that. Wherever there is love, kindness, compassion this is the sign that God is present and at work - even in those who would say they do not believe in him. A leading theologian of the 20th century, Karl Rahner, used to speak of 'anonymous Christians,' people who are Christlike in the way they live, but do not want to subscribe to the Christian religion. We would like them to do so, but we may ask what really matters, what really is important? Is it saying you believe this or that and joining in the rituals, or is it leading a God-centered life?

A favourite text of mine is from Micah:

*This is what the Lord God asks of you, only this:
to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.*

If this is all God asks of us, it makes me wonder how much of our religious practices are really necessary in order to do God's will. I cannot help thinking also that there must be people without number doing what God asks who have nothing to do with organised religion, and that is quite a challenge to those of us who do want to keep up our religious ways. It shows us that maybe we become too conventional in our thinking and can learn, if we are open to it, from non-religious sources.

For example, people will still criticise the churches and religions for being too patriarchal, too much male-centered: we even see God as masculine. One of St. Paul's more dramatic sayings is that in Christ there is no distinction of male and female, slave and free, Greek and Jew, but it was not until 20th century secular feminism brought the issue into the forefront of people's thinking that the churches began to question their own patriarchalism - and one may ask how far they have got with that.

One of the drawbacks of religion is that it can lead to a rather narrow view of God. We think he is only concerned with people when they are doing religious things or he can only be found in church buildings. But God, as God, must be present everywhere, in all times, places and

circumstances, and can surprise us greatly by how he appears in unexpected places. We have a good instance of how this can work in the first reading at Mass on this Sunday, from the book of Isaiah.

A great disaster for God's people occurred in the year 597 B.C. when Judah came under the control of the Babylonian empire and its King Nebuchadnezzar, who besieged and destroyed the holy city of Jerusalem. Many of the leading Judaeans were exiled to Babylon, cut off from their homeland and their ancestral religion which was so important to them. For about sixty years they lived in exile, until the balance of power shifted again and Babylon was conquered by the Persians under their emperor Cyrus. It was Cyrus who allowed the Jewish people to return to the holy land and resume their religious life, rebuilding the city and the temple. Isaiah sees him in doing this as the agent of God. He does not know the God of the Hebrews, and would not acknowledge him if he did, but he is doing God's will.

*Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
'It is for the sake of my servant Jacob, of Israel my chosen one,
that I have called you by your name.
I am the Lord unrivalled, there is no other God besides me.
Though you do not know me, I arm you
that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun
that apart from me all is nothing.'*

Here is an astonishing, amazing claim. The last person whom one might expect to be God's servant turns out to be his chief minister. There could be no clearer indication that God is a God of surprises, who cannot be confined within or limited by our understanding of him. He will always go beyond anything we can conceive of him, and he is sovereignly free to bestow his gifts wherever he, not we, desires, on the good and the bad alike.

Those who oppose Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees who were the teachers of the Jewish religion, do not like the idea that this unlettered upstart could have a better insight into the nature of God than they themselves do and is undermining their standing with the people. They are always on the look-out to catch him out doing or saying something unacceptable. This Sunday's Gospel has the famous story in which they ask Jesus the trick question whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar, their Roman overlord, or not. As so often the questioners do not really want to know the answer, they are only trying to get Jesus to condemn himself out of his own mouth. In this case they have got him both ways. If he says yes, they can say he is collaborating with the Roman occupation of the Jewish homeland; if no, they can say he is making trouble for the people. Jesus manages to dumbfound them with the clever reply, 'Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' This is really no answer at all, as it leaves open the question what is Caesar's, what is God's? But it shuts them up for the moment.

It often happens in the Gospels that people ask Jesus questions wanting to catch him out or seeking his approval for knowing the right answer already. He will not play these games, but usually turns the question round or reinterprets it against them. There may, however, be

another deeper reason why Jesus tends not to answer questions directly. As we have seen before in these reflections, when Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God he does so in indirect ways, by comparisons or by telling the stories we call parables. He does not say, the kingdom of God is X-Y-Z, but the kingdom of God is like ...

Our understanding of God is necessarily limited by how we can think and imagine things in this world, but God is not confined to this world or to our ways of thinking. To have this pointed out to you must be infuriating to people who think God can be fully and correctly worked out and they are the ones who know how to do this, those who have got it right. No wonder, then, that the religious teachers of his day were so hostile to Jesus and his mission. What he teaches and demonstrates in action is that God is love, that God is with us and that God is available to us in the ordinariness of everyday life - that he wants to accept us, heal us, feed us and fill us with his life. For us it is not so much a matter of understanding (God goes beyond our understanding), but knowing God in these ways, something possible for everybody and indeed what God calls everybody to experience - including those we might expect to be least capable of it, even Persian emperors!

Wishing you every blessing in the week ahead, Fr. Robin

(robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk).