

Homily Sunday 25th October 2020

Dear Friends,

We hear a lot these days about the multi-faith society and have come to know more about other faiths than used to be the case. It is clearly good to understand other people's beliefs and practices if we are living alongside them, as it may help us to see them not as opponents but as allies. The great world faiths probably have more in common with each other than they do with the world at large which turns away from religion, and so need to stand together. We can still hold to what is distinctive and special about our own beliefs while respecting those of others which differ from ours.

I once listened to a dialogue between a Christian spokesman, a Benedictine monk, and a Buddhist lama. They were talking about the same idea from their own perspective, the Christian speaking on salvation and the Buddhist on illumination, which in their terms is roughly an equivalent to what we would call salvation. To be honest I could not follow much of what the Buddhist said, but there was one thing I heard which was very clear. He said, 'The purpose of our religion is to help people to live well.' I thought, that is good, we can certainly go along with that.

What it means to live well is a very large question, but at one level it must include being peaceful and law-abiding, trying to get on well with others, being ready to do people a good turn. We do not need religion to know that these are good qualities to have. Human society could scarcely function at all if people did not observe the agreed laws, for instance, the laws that provide the framework in which we can live well, and most people can see that it is just commonsense that we should live in these sorts of ways. It is summed up in what is often known as the Golden Rule: treat other people in the way you would like to be treated yourself. Most religions have always had some version of the Golden Rule at the centre of their moral code.

We can see again that the Golden Rule is commonsense and need not necessarily imply any particular concern for other people. It is simply prudential to behave towards other people as we would like them to behave towards ourselves, because it holds the hope that they will do so, though you can never quite tell! But the Christian faith bids us go beyond what is merely commonsensical towards

an almost heroic concern and compassion for the other regardless of the consequences for ourselves.

In our tradition the beginnings of this new approach are found in what is called the Mosaic Law, the Jewish Torah handed down by Moses. The first reading of this Sunday's Mass gives us a short snippet from the laws in the book of Exodus, which shows that the children of Israel are expected to show a special concern for those in great need: strangers, widows, the poor and the homeless. If, for example, you have taken a man's cloak as a pledge for repayment of a loan you should give it back to him before the end of the day if it is all the covering he has to sleep in. That is not particularly in your interests, but it is what God's Law enjoins.

In the Gospel reading for this Sunday the teachers of the Law again confront Jesus and try to catch him out with a difficult question: which is the great commandment of all? He gives the famous answer: the greatest commandment is to love God with all your being, and the second is to love your neighbour as yourself. The Law and the Prophets, the whole of our religious tradition, depend on these two laws.

We notice that the love of God comes first. Love of neighbour flows from that. It is when we know God and give ourselves to him that we will find the ability to love others in God's self-giving way. So if we think that the task is too great and we are not up to it - we can behave well towards others, but love them? that is a tall order and beyond my capability - we need to remember that it is God in us who enables us to live our lives in the way he asks. The first essential, therefore, is to centre ourselves on God and allow him to live us and be at work in us, so that everything we do and are comes out of the deep centre which is the Spirit of God at the heart of our human being. As we saw in the story of Martha and Mary, listening, being open to God is the priority, the part chosen by Mary: all our activity, our bustle and work, needs to come from there.

Living in the parish of Ealing Abbey, a Benedictine monastery, I often think of the way of St. Benedict, who drew up a short document known as the *Rule* to guide the life of brothers and sisters in community. It is designed to provide a harmonious setting in which the individual is able to make listening to God the centre of his or her life, alongside work and leisure, food and sleep and all we need to live our human life. It is a demanding way, but nobody forces you into it and it is not so demanding that it cannot be met by anybody who has the desire. We are not all called to be monks or nuns, but we are all called to know and love God and serve

each other in love through loving him first. It is difficult, but possible, and the more we do truly know and love God the more we will be able to live a God-centered life.

Following the passage in this Sunday's reading from St. Matthew's Gospel there is a section we do not hear at Mass (chapter 22, verses 41 to 46) in which Jesus turns the tables on his smart-alec interrogators and catches them out with a question they cannot answer, and from that day nobody dared to ask him any more questions. Knowing answers to questions about God will only get you so far, it is knowing God as we know and love another person that matters most.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

(robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)