

THURSDAY HOMILY AT MASS DURING CONFERENCE OF PRIESTS 8/7/21

Today's gospel speaks of the quite radical call to discipleship, and the trust those first disciples are to place in the ways that Jesus has equipped them for their mission work. It reminded me of something that Mgr. James Shea says in his book, 'From Christendom to Apostolic Mission'. He imagines the apostles, after the Ascension, gathering for their 1st Evangelisation Committee Meeting, with the words of Jesus ringing in their ears, 'Go make disciples of all nations'. The Agenda: To bring the Gospel of Christ to the world. Their resources: Bishops? 11; priests? Same number; deacons? None; religious orders? none; seminarians? none; seminaries? none
Christian believers? A few hundred; Church buildings? None; written gospels? None; influential contacts in high places? Next to none; attitude of society towards them? Ignorant to hostile.

His point is that if the apostles had been thinking in a Christendom mode and had assessed their situation from the point of existing Christian institutions they would have been overwhelmed by discouragement, facing crises in every direction: vocational, financial, catechetical, educational, numerical. – sound familiar?! But they weren't discouraged; they were filled with hope and joy; with confidence in the Lord, in the gospel message they were to proclaim. They knew their task was to be open to and used by the Holy Spirit they had received to grow the Church; and grow it most certainly did. Similarly, we the Church in a post-Christendom and more apostolic time, need to have the same confidence in the power and goodness of the message we bear; in its life-changing, transforming potency and in the Church's power of regeneration and growth. If it were simply a human institution the Church would never have survived the ups and downs, the very real challenges of the past 2000 years. He sharpens it up by saying that those of us in positions of influence and authority (that's all of us) need to be personally convinced that Christ is the answer to every human problem; that obedience to the gospel message brings freedom, that holiness leads to happiness, that a world without God is a desolate waste-land and that new life in Christ transforms darkness into light. Our hope and trust in Christ needs now to be strong, and there must be an openness to the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

He argues that we should now expect, in a time of transition like ours, that pastoral strategies that have worked for a long time will no longer prove as effective as once they did. We should expect that many who have attended Mass, because it was the conventional thing to do, will stop attending. Although he's writing from a North American perspective, it's not difficult to see something of our situation when he speaks of what he calls the 'hereditary Catholics', currently in the Church, with only sentimental ties to the Church because of their upbringing. He argues that

sentimentality will not sustain a way of discipleship when that brings them into conflict with those around them in our ever changing society. We may see something of this process quickened somewhat by the effects of the Covid lockdowns and restrictions on some of those who were once attending Mass but have not returned. This then is a time to encourage people and not do anything that might quench the smouldering wick, however weak the flame of personal faith might have become.

He usefully reminds us that the great task of the Church in every age is to preach and live out the gospel with clarity and conviction. What effect that may have on others is not the Church's to determine. Jesus, himself, did not gain the best of receptions from all who listened to him. This, Shea, argues was not because his preaching failed, to the extent that it didn't produce conversion. Rather, it actually succeeded perfectly in what it was meant to do: it tested the hearts of those listening such that they either rose or fell when confronted by his message. The same is true in the Church's witness to the faith. So, in a society such as ours moving away from Christendom, the Church will grow smaller because the majority of people tend to embrace the ruling or predominant vision of society. This, I would argue, helps us to look at what's happening in the Church at large in the UK, and in our diocese, in a more balanced perspective. There were only 11 apostles. So too, today, 11 faith-filled followers of Christ in each of our parishes will prove more fruitful in attracting new believers than a thousand whose faith is lukewarm or non-existent. He reminds us that the Church does not grow by mass movements (no pun intended) but rather it moves forward one soul at a time, as each individual catches the fire of belief from others and is grafted into the Body of Christ. The true importance and sign of growth is never found in numbers, but in the intensity of the flame of faith inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That's surely what we all want – God's Church on fire in this diocese!