



26th Week of the Year 27th/28th September 2020

Reflection – Mgr Daniel McHugh

“In your mind you must be the same as Christ Jesus”

The news this week has been dominated by the increase in cases of COVID 19 across the UK. “How are we to avoid the total lockdown that took place in March this year?” A key moment was of course the address to the Nation by the P.M. Boris Johnson on Tuesday evening 22 September, and the central message came across in his statement “collective health is dependent on individual behavior”. If we learn nothing else from this stage of the Pandemic, it is that.

At the same time, in his weekly General Audience, Pope Francis has been developing Church Social Teaching in relation to the Pandemic: you can follow the series of teachings on the Vatican News Website. This Wednesday the focus was on the need to involve all levels of society in the post – Pandemic Time. “The only way out of the current crisis is all together”, he said. “From top to bottom and from bottom to top.” He was keen to explore the principle of “subsidiarity” which is about engaging the whole of society in the future of our world.

When I was away on my week in the Yorkshire Dales, I was speaking with my Priest friend about the impact of the Pandemic on the Church. He, a Parish Priest, was concerned that some people who have come to Church regularly might cease to come when we get back to normal. He was echoing what a lay friend had said to me “many will not return to regular Churchgoing – the habit has been broken!” Now, there is something to think about!

I admit I have been concerned about the decline of the Churchgoing over my years as a Priest. I was interested then to see a recent statistics report on Church growth in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, an International magazine. The statistics show a decline in Baptisms in Europe and North America, the more secularised world, whereas there has been growth in Africa and Asia. Where there is decline in numbers, the number of Priests has declined too. Practice is another matter, and it is here that the Pandemic may be a cause for concern.

Interestingly, the readings of the Mass this Sunday can help our reflection. You have often heard it said “actions speak louder than words”. The interesting thing about today’s Parable is the context in which it occurs: it comes in chapter 21 of St Matthew where Jesus drives the buyers and sellers from the temple, which certainly got the attention of the Religious Leaders, and they question his authority for doing this. Instead, he responds through this Parable which questions their authority: they are the ones represented by the second son who proclaim they will do what the Father wants, but don’t do it. They didn’t listen to John the Baptist calling for Repentance though they often gave it lip service. On the other hand, it was the outsiders: the prostitutes, the tax

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Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



collectors for the Romans, and other sinners who did. And Jesus confronts them saying it is the “outsiders” who will enter God’s Kingdom before them.

Fr Ferlita, a Jesuit commentator on the Sunday readings, speaks of a “third” Son not mentioned in the Parable, and that is Jesus Himself, the Son of God. And, we can profit by reflecting on what it says about Him in the powerful second reading which is quoted in the VLOG I do with friends for the “Burning Bush”, 10 minutes of Reflection and Prayer leading to action each Sunday. The letter to the Philippians reads: “In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus. His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave.... he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised Him high”.

The third son not mentioned in the Parable is our inspiration, the one who said “yes” in obedience to His Father *and* took action.

Yes, the Pandemic may result in fewer people going regularly to Church, but it is also a time to think about our world and what matters and what we want to leave to our children. I was reminded in a post on Facebook of a book by Emeritus Pope Benedict in 2009 “Faith for the Future” where he foresees a smaller Church but at the same time a more powerful witness of where there is “life and hope beyond death”. He wrote she will be seen as a man’s home, “there will be a fresh flourishing”. I would like more of us participating online in the Eucharist, to return to active participation when the problems associated with this virus pass. The future must be one of Hope as Pope Francis said at his last Wednesday Audience: “Hope is audacious” he said. “Let’s encourage ourselves to dream big”. The Prime Minister said in relation to COVID “Collective health depends on individual behavior”. The future of the Church, the Faith of future generations, depends on individuals too, you and me following the example of the Third Son, the Man for Others, who was obedient to the Father.

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