

## Homily for The Twenty Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)(13/10/19) Canonisation of John Henry Newman

There is no doubt that Cardinal Newman was one of the greatest Englishmen of the nineteenth century. But he died 120 years ago, and wonderful as it is that the Church is recognizing his holiness, we are bound to ask ourselves, why does it matter to me? What does he have to say that I need to hear? He was a man of so many parts, so many ideas and gifts, that it is hard to know where to start with him, but I'm going to suggest that there are five things that we really need to hear from him to live better lives today.

The first message that Newman has for us is one that he learned as a teenager. He had been a nominal Anglican, a rather lukewarm adherent of the state church, until he came under the influence of an evangelical clergyman. What Newman learned from him he referred to as his 'First conversion', and it left him completely changed. He discovered that God was really present in his life, and he felt an almost physical longing to live every moment in the presence of the one who had created him. All his life he felt a deep thirst for God, and a passion to pursue holiness, which is the road to God's presence. Previously he had admired goodness, and tried to achieve it; now he swapped that and instead pursued holiness. Goodness and holiness are not quite the same. Goodness is fine: we would all prefer to be surrounded by a world of good people; but holiness is something more, it requires one to live each day now as if one were already a citizen of Heaven. It places everything we do, and the value of all the things around us, in the light of eternity. Goodness might be directed at preserving and pursuing things that pass; holiness is concerned with the things that will last for eternity. To live each moment in God's presence, in the shadow of his love, is more demanding and more rewarding than simple goodness, and Newman embraced it. Good people will focus on the material world around them; holy people will focus on the unseen and the spiritual, which give meaning and value to the material. Holiness is needed more than goodness.

As the years passed, Newman the pastor, the teacher, the intellectual, immersed himself in the great writings of the saints. There was much that he respected in the Church of England that he belonged to: its quest for virtue, its reliance on the scriptures, but he realized that as he read the early Fathers of the church, they would not recognize in the Church of England the church that they belonged to. If he wanted to be close to the Christians of the first 1500 years, especially to the men who had shaped the faith and crystallized its details, he must be a Catholic; and he realized, as many have done since, that you cannot be an Anglican and a Catholic, you have to choose. And so in his second conversion he returned to the Church of the Fathers. In that great crisis two major themes in the life of Cardinal Newman collide: conscience and self-sacrifice. And he gives up everything, to find everything in the Catholic Church. Conscience and self-sacrifice; there can be no real depth of life without them, and here we find another of Newman's great messages to our modern world. Not long ago it was revealed that Sophie Scholl, the young woman who with other students at Munich University paid with their lives for distributing leaflets urging resistance to the Nazis had been inspired to do so by what she had read of the writings of none other than Cardinal Newman. Conscience is not just opinion, or prejudice; conscience requires careful forming, it requires hard work to enable us to hear the reality of what God wants from us. Newman spent years working on what was to be his great decision.

Conscience is not just what seems instinctively appealing, or what the crowd calls out to us, or the fashion of the age. It is the irresistible voice of deep truth that calls out to us from eternity; it is the voice of God, and it must be followed, even at great cost. And there is Newman's second lesson for us.

Newman is, of course, well known for his profound, often revolutionary, and challenging writings. But he was also a devoted pastor, a shepherd, a guardian of souls. In visiting the people among whom he lived, and perhaps more still in the enormous correspondence with those who asked for his advice, Newman showed a passionate care for the individual. Where the academic is so often dealing with general principles, Newman was also deeply interested in individual people, in this one soul in front of him now. Holiness demands an openness to the joys and the sorrows of the people around you, and Newman kept this door of openness wide open, writing advice to people almost to his dying day. And here is another of his lessons for us. To live well is not just to pursue goodness, or even holiness, but is to engage totally and completely with the individual, the one who is with me this moment. Great people find their greatness not just in great decisions, but in the little moments of personal engagement.

Newman was, though, more than a pastor who cared for the souls of others. He passionately believed that every follower of Christ has a summons to bear witness to the truths of the faith. In a world that is often lost, or misguided, or misled, or confused, he believed that each of us must be bearers of the kindly light that will lead others to safety, to joy and to real purpose. In his famous meditation on vocation he said:

*"He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do his work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep his commandments."*

And so here are his final two lessons for us. The Christian is called to know Christ and to make him known: to read, and learn and understand; to draw on the experience and wisdom of others so that we can know Christ intimately, and having done so to make his presence in the world concrete, so that others come to know what we have known.

- 1) Holiness is more precious than goodness;
- 2) Listening to conscience, true conscience, the voice of the eternal, whatever the cost, is the only way to be truly alive;
- 3) No-one is too great or too busy to engage completely with the person in front of them, so that heart speaks to heart;
- 4) To be a friend of Christ is to know what we believe, and why, and be ready to explain it;
- 5) Whatever specific plan God has for each of us, his plan for all of us is that by the pattern of our lives we make him present in the middle of the world, in every place where we live and work.