

## Homily For The First Sunday of Lent (Year A)(01/03/20)

In the familiar Gospel reading today we hear how Jesus goes out in the wilderness, where he will have time with the Father in prayer, and away from the business and the demands of daily life. It is a chance for him to encounter deep reality. I was asked at a recent meeting of our parish team to talk a little about what we are doing at Mass, and why we come to Mass, and in a way it is the same: it is a chance for a break from the ordinary demands of life, and an encounter with the reality of God. But it is, of course, much more than that.

Let us go back several stages. Let us imagine that we are all moved off, we must leave and travel away to make a new home somewhere else. We find a patch of land, and this is to be home. Some of the land will do for houses, farms, shops, but one patch of land we will mark out to be useless. So much in the world has to justify its existence by fulfilling a function, but just as God created the Sabbath Day as a day which is useless, a day when we are not performing useful tasks, but instead are revelling in the joy and the wonder of life, the world, our families, our faith, so also he sets among us places that do not need to justify their usefulness. In a world where everything must be useful, the people who are not useful (the young, the sick, the old) are at risk, as are buildings that may be beautiful and life-giving but cannot justify their existence by their usefulness, and indeed any activity that does not serve financial utility. It is not a happy thought.

Anyway, on this space that we have set apart, we will build up a hill. This is a powerful religious symbol. We know that God is not just 'up there', of course, but there is something very powerful about climbing a mountain to enter the presence of God. Moses climbs a mountain to receive the tablets of the Law; Abraham climbs a mountain to sacrifice Isaac; it is on a mountain that Jesus is transfigured, that he is crucified, and from which he ascends. The mountain is the place of encounter with God, so we will put one in our special field. Then, on top of the mountain we will put an altar. In the Old Testament, again and again the people of Israel construct an altar for sacrifice. The fundamental truth of our Christian faith is sacrifice: Jesus offers himself, he offers himself for us, but also to us. This is not to satisfy some bloodthirsty God, but Jesus chooses to live a life that is radically challenging, radically upsetting the priorities that people have, and in modelling this life he presents a threat to those in power to the extent that they decide he must be destroyed. His whole life is an offering of himself, and this reaches its climax when he allows himself to be crucified rather than compromise a life of self-giving.

So, to make our new home, our new village, complete we have set aside a place with a hill and an altar, so that we can have an encounter with the God whose sacrifice is really here with us every time we celebrate Mass. Then, we will build a tent around the altar and the hill, a tent to shelter them and to shelter the ones who come to worship here, and this tent (which will in reality be a stone building) we will call a church. This marks off the sacred space given over to the worship of God. In it we will put some other things, and we need these, but above all we have a mountain and an altar and so all is well.

So, when we come to the church on a Sunday, in a sense it makes no sense to say 'I am going to church', because it is not really the church that we are coming to – if it had no altar in it, it would just be an empty space. It makes much more sense to say that 'I am going to the altar'.

So our starting place is that on a Sunday we go to the altar. Lots of other things happen at Mass: we sing hymns we like, we meet friends, we pray for the needy, we listen to the scriptures and, hopefully, to a homily that is enlightening, but above all we have come to the altar.

Once we come to Mass, come to the altar, the first part of the Mass is a preparation for what is to come. There is a meeting with Christ in the scriptures and in the homily, but still this is not enough. It still leaves us hungry for more. So then the priest climbs the mountain and stands at the altar, and there through him God makes real for us a sacrifice. On this altar Christ himself comes, and we are present again at the supreme act of love, at the moment in which he offers the most precious thing he has, the most precious thing in the world, he offers himself, for us but also to us. Looking up at this altar on a hill we see the most absurd (in human terms) sacrifice. God gives himself for us. This is scandalous, and for many people it was too much to believe. God, it appears, is not uninterested in us; he is not playing with us as the ancient Gods seemed to do, teasing us as a cat does a mouse. God gives himself for us, so that we might live fuller, happier and more joy-filled lives. And this is what we see each day at Mass. Seeing this truth, and in the familiarity of the Mass we might need to remind ourselves of it again and again, there is only one response: Wow, that is amazing! 'Wow, that is amazing, I want some of that, I want some of that world where God gives himself up for me, gives himself to me, I want to be the sort of person who lives with this in my heart, that is what we call worship, and that is the first half of what Mass is: the glorification of God.

As human beings we are created to worship, to find outside ourselves that which is so amazing, so life-giving, that we make it the centre of who we are. And it is important for us that we come to Mass, that we see all this, and that we give it our 'Wow, I want some of that' because if we don't, built as we are for worship, we will end up worshipping something else, and that might be very dangerous indeed. The only safe object of our worship, our 'That is amazing' is the God-man on the altar on the hill. Anything else will turn out to be very risky indeed.

In the year 990 Prince Vladimir attended the Divine Liturgy at the Church of Santa Sophia in Constantinople with some others. There was the smoke of the incense, the otherworldly chanting, there were the icons that looked like faces peering into the Church from some other world, the people prostrate in prayer and adoration. All this simply blew his mind.

*"And we went into the Greek lands, and we were led into a place where they serve their God, and we did not know where we were, on heaven or on earth; and do not know how to tell about this. All we know is that God lives there with people and their service is better than in any other country. We cannot forget that beauty since each person, if he eats something sweet, will not take something bitter afterwards; so we cannot remain any more in paganism."*

The glorification of God, our 'Wow!' to who he is and what he does, is the first movement of the Mass. But there is another. What difference does this all make to me? How will I be different after this, how will my life be different, how will people be able to tell? That is the second movement of the Mass, the sanctification of humanity, and that 'what difference does it make to me?' is what I will look at next week.