

Homily for The Second Sunday of Lent (Year A)(08/03/20)

Last Sunday I spoke a little about the Meaning of Mass: why we come, and what is really going on. You may remember I imagined us settling together in a new place: setting a parcel of land apart for sacred use; building there a hill on which God could be encountered, as he is encountered in today's Gospel reading; placing on that hill an altar where his self-giving love could be made real; building a tent around hill and altar to shelter them, a tent which is what we would call a church; and then I spoke about us coming to the altar, and seeing there the love of God which is so great that it is given to us without condition and without holding back, a love so pure and so life-giving that our only response must be 'Wow – I want some of that, I want to live with that in my heart' and that Wow is what we call worship. The first objective of celebrating Mass is this 'Wow!', the worship and the glorification of God.

But a worship of God that leaves us untouched, unchanged, would in the end leave his world untouched and unchanged. We would come down from the mountain, and carry on as before. But in today's Gospel story the danger is that the disciples are so much changed that they lose sight of everyday life, so wrapped up in the 'Wow' that they are no longer able to get on with ordinary life, and Jesus has to warn them against this. So, as well as the glorification of God, there is a second objective to our celebration of Mass: the sanctification of persons. Coming to Mass and worshipping God helps us to be changed. When Moses comes down the mountain after meeting God his face is so changed, so radiant, that the people are afraid and he has to cover his face. Whenever Moses goes into God's presence he removes the veil, and he keeps the veil off while he tells the people what God has said, and the people see his face glowing as he speaks, but once he has spoken he veils his face again until the next time (Exodus 34.29ff). Moses is changed by being in the presence of God; his face is aglow with God's glory; in God's presence he has been sanctified, made holy.

So, when we come to Mass and we are properly disposed, we are attentive to what is going on, to what God is doing, and we are open to meeting with him, we can hope that his grace will mould and change us. Think of the story of Zacchaeus: he climbs a tree as an inquisitive watcher, observing Jesus as he passes by; but Jesus stops, speaks to him, spends time with him, and by the end of the story Zacchaeus is a new man, his life and his priorities are totally changed. But how might our presence at Mass change us? In what ways does this happen?

Bishop Richard has put forward a vision that our liturgy should be 'an encounter with the wonder of Heaven' which will change the way that we relate to the people around us (Address to Deans, Feb 2020, quoted in Review of Sunday Mass Times Document, March 2020). As we come to Mass and see here the beauty of the self-giving love of Christ, we realize that this is what we want most of all, at a very deep level indeed: to rest serenely in a place where we receive such a generous love. We meet Christ in his generous gift of himself; we cling to that meeting, because like Peter on the mountain of the Transfiguration we do not want it to end; and, clinging to that experience we are able to be the voice of self-giving love to the world of today, to the people of today. Coming into the presence of beauty we cling to that beauty, for dear life, and so we take it away with us at the end of Mass, we are ambassadors of the love of God¹.

¹ '[Liturgy's] purpose is to be a place of encounter with Jesus Christ which binds people to him in such a way that they are able to become his voice in the present, his voice for the people and the world of today' Pope Benedict XVI 'A New Song for The Lord'.

And there is more. Much about the modern world is directed towards dulling our sense of the spiritual, of the value of the unseen, and persuading us that ‘what you see is what you get’. A culture that is materialistic, that judges the value of people by what they possess, and of things by how useful they are, does not want us to think too much about spiritual values. The liturgy helps us to grow in holiness (which is no more than becoming more real, more human) by waking us up. When so many ideas conspire to blunt our sense of the sacred, our sense that unseen things are of greater value than material things, the liturgy says to us: stop a moment, and look. The material, physical attributes of things and of people are only part of the story. Here water becomes a source of life; oil becomes a means of spiritual healing; bread becomes body, wine becomes blood, the sinner becomes the child of God and the dead man becomes alive. Our Mass invites us to wake up to reality, to see beyond the materialism of our culture and to see, and treasure, the unseen spiritual value of things, and more importantly of people.

This sense that the liturgy wakes us up leads us to revere those things that we treasure. Once we remind ourselves that there is more to things than meets the eye, more to people than their usefulness to us, we discover reverence. Once we open the eyes of our soul and see that bread and wine has become something more, we learn reverence not just for the Sacred Eucharist, but also for everything else around us. As we learn to be reverent in the presence of God, to see his true value, we also learn to be reverent to our own lives; to the people around us; to the creation which God has given us to care for and nurture. The Eucharist helps us to make reverence, ascribing to everything its proper value (not just seeing everything as an extension of ourselves, something useful for our comfort or pleasure) a key part of how we live.

The Mass proceeds at its own pace. It has a proper form, and there are no short cuts. We cannot hurry it, skip bits or abbreviate it. Its pace is beyond our control. We come to Mass not to do anything at all, but simply to be: to be engaged in the ‘Wow!’ that is worship, and that brings us back to an understanding of just how great human life can be. I have been thinking a lot recently about hurry, or busy-ness, after reading a book that suggests the ruthless elimination of hurry from our lives is crucial to spiritual health². That is so right. In our hurried lives, anything that is quiet, or reflective, or spiritual is squeezed out. Think for a moment, what things do you do best when you are in a hurry? Driving? Praying? Advising a friend? Thinking through problems? The Mass slows us down. There is no hurrying it, and that is a good thing for us.

As we celebrate Mass, God receives ordinary things, bread and wine, and transforms them into extraordinary things, the Body and Blood of Christ, before giving them back to us. What is it that changes the ordinary to the extraordinary, the mundane to the sensational? It is casting over those ordinary gifts a veil, the veil of Christ’s generous love that gives himself without reserve. If we would be holy, that is, be authentic, lively human beings, we must allow the veil of that self-gift, that generosity beyond all bounds, to be cast over our ordinary lives, and then they have the chance of becoming extraordinary. There is no holding that back.

‘There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him’.

Pope Benedict XVI Homily at Mass to inaugurate his Petrine Ministry

² ‘The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry’ John Mark Comer.