

Homily 30th Sunday 29/10/17

'The importance of ritual, repetition and tradition in our worship and daily lives.'

In the gospel today Jesus quotes a shortened text of the Shema, a traditional prayer for every Jew to this day.

"Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge you today be written on your heart. You shall repeat them to your children and say them over to them, whether at rest in your house or walking abroad, at your laying down or at your arising. You shall fasten them on your hand as a sign, and on your forehead as a circlet. You shall write them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates."

And the Jews have literally done that. The Orthodox Jews have those funny looking boxes on their head, which has the Shema in them, the Mezuzah, I think, it's called. The little thing on the doorpost has these words written on a scroll and put in a box, so devout Jews touch it, like you would bless yourself with holy water on entering and leaving the house, or church. Because it's not only a prayer, but like many things in the Jewish faith which we have inherited, it's also a ritual.

I was very interested recently, to be following a television series, I don't know whether you saw it on BBC Four, about the Buddha and Socrates and Confucius, and Confucius was the last one. And of course, Confucius wanted to restore sanity to China - a war torn country, where morals and everything had gone to pot, and there was just violence and disrespect. And he said, his first principle was learning from the past, from greater times of unity and respect. And he came up with a principle about ritual, he said ritual wasn't just a religious act, ritual pervaded the whole of society. And ritual was so important that it stabilized relationships. It led to a life of virtue and concentration and reflection, and it led people into a different domain where they could show respect and understanding in relation to others and creation.

Confucius highlighted a great philosophy around the importance of ritual - in fact, he was a stickler for it. He was a stickler in the sense he laid down rites even for making tea and pouring it and everything, so that people knew how to do it and to do it properly for guests. And his philosophy was so successful that it lasted in the Chinese empire for a 1,000 years.

However, this programme brought home to me how we're losing sight of ritual, particularly in prayer and liturgy, and perhaps it's because maybe we're losing sight of ritual in secular life, even the simple ritual of shaking someone's hands on greeting them and other signs of respect. I can certainly remember when I was a young man, the older generation, who were my age, who wore hats. I used to walk around with an SVP man who wore a hat, and every lady he spoke to, he lifted his hat, and it was a lovely little old-fashioned ritual of respect for that person. And taking the hat off, for a man, when you entered a house or church. All known rituals.

And when it comes to worship, one of the things I notice is some people say, "Well..." a person said it to me not so long ago, "Well, Mass is repetitive - you know what's coming next." But that's the whole point of ritual. Ritual is about knowing what comes next so that you can give yourself to it wholly and not hold back saying, "I wonder whether I'll be able to agree with this." Now, sometimes ritual can be added to, maybe in a more freer liturgical tradition that allows for jumping up and down and clapping and singing, which is fine. And that's about to some degree stirring the feelings and stirring the heart, and to some degree being entertained and engaged. But ritual is not primarily about feelings - but it does open the door to feelings being moved. Ritual is primarily about stability, that wherever you go you know that same ritual will be performed. If we lose sight of the meaning of ritual we can forget that it needs full participation - it's not just an external law or rite to be observed, but all of us need to respond to the ritual, to understand it, to enter into it, and to enable us to relate to others.

So ritual is also about uniting people together because there's a common thread. Even things like saying the Creed is a common thread throughout the world that puts stakes in the ground. The Creed doesn't give us the totality of the Faith, but it does put stakes in the ground about the minimum, the very important, basic goal posts of Christian doctrine. So one of the important factors that I became aware of in watching this programme on Confucius is how we perhaps don't fully participate in ritual anymore, because maybe we're losing sight of its importance, especially in the Mass. Things like the responses and the symbols - maybe for some of us we've reduced them to minimalism and repetition - even the triple sign of the cross before the gospel - participating in that isn't about just doing an external sign, it's about ritualizing internally that I love God with all my mind, with my lips and my heart, and to proclaim and LIVE His faith.

Once we do participate fully in ritual, we enter the opportunity of being moved in our feelings by being grounded in solid things that unite us as a community. So ritual isn't about being boring, it's about being consistent. Our Catholic Christian rituals go right back to the apostles and Jesus. Okay, they've developed, but our Mass has got a consistency, an authenticity and a repetition that links us with the past. Tradition was/is very important to the Chinese for their ancestor worship. Early missionaries to China, people like Fr Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit, managed to build on Chinese ancestor worship, when he introduced the Catholic beliefs of devotion and prayer to the saints. He knew that ritual and tradition were important in developing and maintaining belief. Today, in our Mass, we are repeating in ritualised form, exactly what went on before, what has been handed down to us, and most importantly that which links us in history to Jesus, and all those who have gone before us and yet to come.

So participation in the Mass, and the responses, that's important. We can sort of get to the stage where we're, "Well, I know all that now, so," and maybe mumble it. But that's wrong. Our repetition is about internalizing our belief. Even a simple thing like, "the Lord be with you," and the response, "And with your spirit," is actually a ritualized association and greeting and communication with others. So it's very important that we articulate that internally, and enthusiastically and not just externally.

Even the Amen, which I find, especially with the young children particularly in school Masses now, they mutter Amen, they don't see the point of it. And yet Amen is a profound "So be it." So at the end of the doxology in the Eucharistic prayer, "Through Him, with Him and in Him," and when we say the Amen, it shouldn't be a grudging muttered Amen, it should be AMEN - SO BE IT - the sacrifice is accomplished!!!

And so I would propose to you to re-look at your participation in ritual, especially the ritual of the Mass, because of its importance to our lives. In a final reference to Confucius regarding the importance of ritual he said, "Ritual made for firmness of character, for virtue, for loyalty and for obedience to all that is good." And that's the real point about ritual - is it's a discipline. It's a discipline in which YOU participate. It structures life in worship, and in liturgy. But ritual and repetition also structures us and says, "I am a participant in this and I am saying yes to all that is good and true in it!"