

Homily 2nd Sunday in Lent Year B (25.2.18)

Transfiguration in ourselves & others

This gospel of the Transfiguration reminds me of the Journey to Faith programme, which is based on the principles of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. This programme will be happening all around the dioceses at this time, with new converts reaching their last stages of preparation before being received into the Church at Easter. Converts, as well as practicing Catholics, experience varying degrees of 'transfiguration' upon encountering the Risen Lord.

My first introduction to RCIA, was the official book with all the instructions and rites, and which explains the principles behind conversion. I worked as a lay minister, discerning my vocation to the priesthood, in the Benedictine Parish of St. Mary's, Leyland, from 1981 to 1983. A previous century, it seems miles away, 'cause I was only in my 20s. I was given the task of instructing new converts, and I remember the power of sharing and giving people a chance to open their hearts to God in a safe environment.

I remember one young lad who was getting married and wanted to become a Catholic.

And I said,

"Is it because of your girlfriend?"

And he said,

"No, it's because of her granddad. She's very close to him and we go round there a lot.

He's so prayerful, and he's so wonderful in his approach to faith."

He said,

"I want a slice of what he's got."

I think that's a beautiful phrase!

And I learnt that our Journey in Faith programmes, help people to explore, express, share, understand, receive, support, and actually experience some transfiguration, some conversion, like that gospel. Converts hear that voice, "This is My son, My Beloved." They come to recognize Jesus in their lives.

Those formative years, when I was a catechist and later as a priest left a deep impression on me, and I'm now very used to dealing with adult converts. I find a different dynamic however, is needed when dealing with children and young adults. But it's interesting that the RCIA programme, that was issued in Rome for the world, and is used so powerfully in Africa and Latin America, also emphasises the same 'transfiguration' principles, when dealing with children of "catechetical age". In other words, those children who are able to be taught the Faith.

Recently, there's been a dramatic change in childhood catechesis our diocese, and I felt I need to talk about it. We can never hope for perfection, in ourselves and others, but we can hope for some transfiguration. And there can never be any transfiguration in our lives without some catechesis. But no amount of catechesis will lead to change. There's got to be a heart that wants to know God. There's also been a radical change in our diocese about who should do the catechising of children, and when should it be done? Over the years, different approaches have been made. Our Bishop, and I think it's so important what he's done that it needs some mentioning, has proposed a radical new approach to catechesis in the Diocese of Leeds.

First of all, he said that, following baptism, as soon as a child is able to be catechised in the faith, children should be prepared to receive and complete their initiation into the Church, with Holy Communion and Confirmation closer together, obviously, linked with the preparatory sacrament of Confession, as is the case with adult converts. This alone has made a radical change if Communion is now to be given in Year Four age group, and Confirmation at the very beginning of Year Six. That's just over a year's difference, so that children become fully initiated into the Church at a young age. This radically changes how we approach these First Sacraments..

And the second thing is that the bishop has produced a whole new programme for the parishes, which is quite a demand for priests and people. He said he wants to empower parents, using a model he's seen in Liverpool. Parents are to be the first teachers of their child in the ways of faith. The bishop wants us to get away from the previous model where parents left their children in the parish centre, with parishioners teaching the children and then the parents collecting them at the end. He wants to move from a catechist teaching other people's children, to providing an opportunity for parents to gain the confidence to teach their own children. This would be done in a group setting with appropriate materials.

So the catechist's role will be different. The catechist will become more a facilitator and a supporter within this group setting. Not primarily teaching the children or the parents, but assisting the parents if they're struggling at any point in passing on the faith to their children. And I suppose this new approach has got the potential, hasn't it? If you ask most parents what was their most formative experience, in relation to God, after being married, they'll often say the birth of a child, and how that child affects so profoundly, their attitude and outlook. And for grandparents too, it's a rebirth, isn't it? The number of people who tell me that it was a dynamically beautiful thing to become a grandparent and to have the opportunity of grandparenting, plus to quote one grandparent, " You can hand them back at the end of the day and they're not your responsibility."

We can powerfully experience God through children. So, the Bishop is hoping, if the new catechesis is done correctly, that parents' lives can also be transfigured a little, through

being involved in passing on the Faith to their child. Because this programme is aimed at helping parent and child to see something of the brilliance of Jesus' clothing, as we heard in that gospel, something of the brightness of Jesus' presence in their lives. And indeed, parents are the most formative influence on children. And if children see their parents taking the faith seriously and sharing it with them in a church setting, then the principles are that in that group setting, those children will be catechised better than if a stranger did it.

But the important thing is the parish. The parish is the setting for our mission to transfigure people's lives. We're in this journey together, because we are transfigured or moved to see the brilliance of Christ's clothing, to hear that voice, "This is my son, my beloved," especially when we invest time and see results when new members come into the fullness of faith. We've actually got two Catholics this year who want to finish their journey to faith, one who wants to be confirmed and make his first Communion, the other who wants to be confirmed. We don't always have adult converts, but when we do, it's always a wonderful experience to see somebody in an adult state coming into the Church with their enthusiasm and new life. With children, they need to see our enthusiasm for the faith, they are the future Church and they need our support and help and prayer.

So this is just by way of a background to tomorrow night's meeting, which will be at at 6:00 in the church hall, when our current catechists will present the programme and explain the help that's needed. Some of the help may be just being there run a creche with children. Some people could work with existing catechists in facilitating this new programme of preparation for Holy Communion and Confirmation. We will learn how to facilitate these workshops, and assist the parents in sharing the materials with their child. So, in whatever way you can help, please come along tonight to find out more. This new programme needs all our support to make it work!

I am really hoping we will have that support, because the invitation comes from the Bishop, and it would be very wrong to disobey the Bishop! (laughter)