

Homily 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (16.9.18)

The Epistle of St James

Faith AND Good Works, are the mark of the true Christian

If I have to ask you which of those readings we had today was the most controversial reading that caused havoc in the world in the sixteenth century, which would you say it was?... The second one from the Epistle of St. James.

You know this is history you're seeing. Because Luther hated that text, Martin Luther. And he called the whole Epistle of James, which I think is fantastic little practical essay on good religion, he called it an 'Epistle of Straw'. He said it was full of rubbish.

And the reason he hated it was because of his own psyche. He was a genius of a man. He did see a lot of corruption and vice in the church and quite rightly criticized it. But he struggled with his own personal life in a religious order that he was in. He did penances and good words, but he never felt right until he stumbled across Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans - all about how the works of the law get you nowhere, it's only faith that saves you. It's God who does the work, we can do nothing of ourselves. And this liberated him, he said, and he suddenly realized he was too focused on self, instead of what God could do through faith for him. And so when he came across James, who was really talking about fruits of faith, he couldn't cope with it. He was saying, nothing you can do, no good deeds, no works of the law or anything, can save you - you have to totally submit to God. And of course, like all controversies this led to entrenchment on both sides and the rest is history about the reformation.

But the thing for me is something more fundamental. First of all in doing that, Luther opened the door to a different sort of scriptural interpretation. In fact, one of his slogans was Scripture Alone. Only scripture is the sole authority on truth according to Luther, but he probably meant that St. Paul had priority.

Now the trouble is, and it seems worse now with modern biblical scholarship, is that you can't be literal about Scripture and it needs a context and it needs an understanding within the setting of anything that was said. And Luther didn't have access to that understanding, but he was reacting against tradition. And yet you know this is the big dividing point, ecumenically, one of them, one of many. We don't take Scripture as the final word of God. There's the word of God, which is alive and active and then there's the written word and the problem with Scripture is which came first, the chicken or the egg? If you can answer that, you can answer the next question: Which came first, the faithful or the faith? The believer or the word? Because we know for a fact that the faithful wrote the book, but the book itself creates faith in a context.

But which came first? The bible or the believer? It's a difficult one to answer. And it brings us into the church's understanding of what is revelation. There's a tiny little document, the Vatican Council's Decree on Revelation, and it's well worth reading if you can get hold of the Vatican II documents. That famous council produced wonderful insights, but the Decree on Revelation it's one of the best in the whole lot, and it's the smallest document and easily accessible.

It's called 'The Decree on Revelation', because that's what we believe in, we believe in revelation. And it says revelation is the active Word of God, which is understood in the context of the lived tradition of the Word and the written word. And it's a twin source for the one thing, revelation. And once you get to that understanding then you realize that biblical interpretation has to be in a context of how it's being lived. You know, the biggest and saddest thing I think is, I think with extreme protestantism is that ecumenism is not possible. It's obviously desired but with extreme protestantism, I don't think it's possible, because Luther's logic led to some of the extremes we have in America, you know where if you take it to its logical conclusion, it's the type of evangelical who might come up to and say,

"Are you saved?"

My only trouble is when I have been challenged by that, by evangelicals, I always want to say,

"Well if you're saved, I don't want to be like you."

I remember whilst at Durham University, a friend of mine was chatting, when we were students, to a young girl who was attending an evangelical meeting. And it was at some college reception and he said to this lad, he said,

"She's a lovely girl, isn't she?"

and he replied,

"Yes, but it's sad she'll go to hell because she doesn't believe in Jesus." How can you have ecumenism with a stance like that? Because that's extreme Protestantism, but it's the logic from Luther that faith alone justifies.

Whereas the Catholic doctrine would say,

"What about the person who's never known God and has never had access to Jesus? If they follow their conscience and do good as they see it, then they are an anonymous Christian. They are in fact a person with the same equivalent of faith and can be saved."

So our faith, ironically, is not exclusive. It says,

"The kingdom of God is bigger than the boundaries of the church, although the boundaries of the church witness to the Kingdom of God. And revelation is bigger than just the written scriptures."