

Homily 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (21.10.18)

Silence opens us to the Presence of God, & the message of His Son

You know, I had a wonderful holiday in Ireland in the Ring of Beara in County Cork, but I'd forgotten a lot of the quirks of Ireland that were very funny, especially humour. I was in a Super Value market, a supermarket and I said to this chap,

"You don't have a toilet, do you please?" And he said,

"Oh, yes, if you go through that door and turn right, you'll find a big tree."

[laughter]

I found the toilet. It's the way he said it. And, the house we were in was built by the farmer and his wife and we had fun and games in the house. It was a real Heath Robinson house. The first night we lit a fire and she said,

"Put the pump on 'cause it sets the water around the radiator," which we did do but it started to rattle in the radiators as the fire got hot. Rattled for an hour, and when we told her the next day we were frightened, she said

"Oh! The pump must have gone." So we relied on the oil then and that ran out. She said,

"Oh, I forgot." She came down with two big tubs of oil. And, then we put the immersion on, and the electric went off. So I said,

"You did build this house yourself, didn't you?" [laughter] Great.

But we overlooked the bay, and we saw some of the mountains of Kerry. And, I'd forgotten going around just that area of Kerry itself, how beautiful and raw the nature is, especially the hills and the mountains. And one or two points where you get out of the car, and you can't hear a thing. You forget what total silence is. I can remember magically getting out in one of the sections in the hills, and you couldn't hear a thing. It was unbelievable. And, it brought home to me how all those great Celtic saints, their theology of the Trinity was totally and utterly centred around creation because of all these reasons. Because of the stillness, the quiet, the magnificent mountains, the wonderful luscious land and water. And this must have spoke to them of the presence of God, a sign to them of the presence of God.

And you know signs can be so powerful that they touch being symbols. In other words, they don't just point to the presence of God, they open the heart to feel the presence of God, to experience it. And I was thinking because, the farmer's wife, of course, she kept saying to us,

"Oh, we take it for granted, those hills."

And you do, don't you in a place you live, but for us it was magnificent.

And so it's also brought home to me that familiarity makes us used to something and to not see the signs. And often signs can be persons. If you think of some great people like Nelson Mandela, or Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the signs of their lives became symbols. They were almost sacramental insights into the mystery of God incarnate in them, in the things they did.

And of course, we take that for granted with Jesus. Because Jesus, as the Gospels portray fully throughout them, was an ordinary, on one level, person, born into this world, who walked around like others. And as the letter to the Hebrews said,

"He was like us in all things, even in weakness, except sin."

And of course, his message, the Gospel message, profound as it was and yet within a few years just after his lifetime, within a small space of time after the death and resurrection, we don't see the Gospel teaching of Jesus proclaimed so much as him proclaimed. The sign in Jesus had become a powerful symbol of the presence of God. He made the Trinity present to all. Tangible, to be experienced.

And the Gospel today tells us not to undervalue that sign. So when these two brothers come to Jesus and say,

"Can we ask a favour?" He says,

"Yes." And then when they ask it, he says,

"Well, can you do this?"

In other words, can you become the sign like me? Will you take the marks that have to be inflicted on me to become the sign and symbol of the presence of God? And they say,

"Yes." He says,

"Well, yes it will happen, but these things you request they're not mine to give."

And he goes on, of course, to emphasise that the glory and grandeur of God, which is portrayed admittedly in the Bible, is not in power, even though it's portrayed that God is all powerful. It's not in awe and absolute fear, although that is portrayed in the Old Testament, in particular. It's not in majesty and splendour and fine robes and all sorts of trimmings, although that imagery is used in the Bible to express that. But Jesus, with these two brothers, in addressing the 12, symbolises that real power, the real splendour, the real presence of God is manifested in humbling oneself, emptying oneself to be filled with the presence of God; to empty oneself in service. The person who becomes great will not wield absolute power but will be slave of all. And this brings us full circle back to the mystics of the Celtic land of Ireland. Because they saw that, those early monks and nuns they saw that in taming nature, in taming human nature into less aggressive activities, the real power of God is manifest.