

Homily 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (13.8.17)

Faith, Reason, Symbolism & Delight

When I'm driving round the parish, visiting or whatever, I usually listen to Radio 4. I quite like Radio 4, and it's often Womans' Hour that's on if I visit after Mass. Recently Richard Dawkins was on the programme, and the conversation was about politics. The interviewer said, at one point,

'but surely you want politicians to be passionate about what they believe?'
But he replied,

'certainly not – I want them to be rational, and to constantly weigh up the facts – their decisions should be based on rationale.'

I suddenly realised how boring Professor Dawkins really is. But he does pose a danger, particularly to our young people, with his 'Enlightenment' views based on the ideas of the 17th/18th centuries. He's a great believer in the Enlightenment – which I think is wrongly named. Rational and Scientific ideas are the only 'real,' because that's all you can prove. What you can prove is real.

Now think about that. I'm not denying that scientific and rational truth are good tools. In fact, St Thomas Aquinas, long before the Enlightenment said, faith seeks understanding through reason. He was a person of great philosophy, and believed in using 'the noggin' to sort things out. It wasn't just faith alone, which was the protestant slogan – but faith AND reason. Professor Dawkins would say, reason alone. Think about that – once we lose any sense of meaning through metaphor and symbol, then we lose the very essence of what it is to be human. And life's full of symbols – we use them to communicate – because we can't 'mind meld' like the Vulcans on Star Trek. I suppose it would be good if I could put my hands on your head and went 'Meeeeeee' and we communicated at a different level, but we can't – so we need symbols. Think of a husband and wife, think of a parent and child – a kiss is not just a sign of affection – it creates affection. A symbol creates the truth. We don't just sit there and look at one another and say I love you, but I don't need to show you in any way whatsoever – I'm just going to be rational about it, and talk to you through reason.

And when we approach religion, we see that science gives us objective truth, and religion gives us personal meaning and personal truth – not private – personal. Religion like poetry, like literature, opens us up to symbolism and metaphor – it's the only way to approach the meaning of life – because literalism by itself is bland. Anything that's just literal, shuts us off from the myriad of meanings in the context of something. So take that beautiful first reading from Elijah, and his encounter with God. Why bother, why bother with all those metaphors – the earthquake, the winds and fire, and the God who was not within them – but found in the still breeze, the 'still small voice of calm?' You know God isn't in the gentle breeze literally – but this imagery is revealing something of the nature of God that brings profound peace. The imagery illustrates the reality of Elijah's encounter with God. And if we're not open to that ?

Sometimes if we encounter a beautiful sunset, or attend an event with others – we get an overpowering feeling of how wonderful it is to be here, how wonderful to be alive – if you've never had that feeling, you've never lived – without those sort of experiences, what's the point of life?

And when we say for example,

'God is personal' we talk about the Person of God. And we talk about things like,

'God delights in His creation.' No God isn't a person like you and me, but it's the image, the symbol of 'person' that introduces us to the fact that we can have a personal relationship with God. And if God isn't like other persons, does He have emotions – anger, love? Jesus did. The word 'delight, is the only way to express how God is intimately connected with the destiny of His creation. We need metaphor and symbol when approaching these most profound truths.

When you talk about anything in your life, say the birth of your child – 'beautiful,' or I was even talking to someone recently who told me they were beside a person who died, and it was so 'beautiful' the way they departed this life, and the way they said goodbye. Obviously they weren't saying these events were literally beautiful, but what they were saying was that there was something of God in the events, and of His beauty. So if we lose symbolism

and metaphor, we lose the very essence of meaning, and if we lose meaning – what is the point of life?