

Homily 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (4.11.18)

For the Christian, faithful to the teaching of Jesus - EVERYONE is our neighbour

You know, we're so used to that Gospel about

'to love the God with all your heart, with all your strength, with all your mind and so on and to love your neighbour as yourself'.

But we don't always realize how revolutionary it is, and maybe we have to ask ourselves a question. Well, which God do I worship? You know the number of people who have said to me,

"But it's all the same God, isn't it, for different people?"

But it's not actually. Not even within our own tradition, we have to see that we always need a reformation, because we're always in danger of creating a God in the image of ourselves. And what do we understand by neighbour? And it's a powerful question, because if you're a disciple of Moses, and remember, Jesus comes from that tradition... We don't realize how revolutionary his message is. It's absolutely dynamic, because we see and we believe, as Catholics, in the development of doctrine, not change, that understanding develops, and you can see it in the Bible itself.

You start off with Israel's experience of a God who saved them from slavery. And they make him a national God as their God and he is unique to them. And then Moses comes along with the dynamism of the law and the subsequent commentaries on the law by commentators about how to fulfil the law. And love of God becomes fulfilling the ritual law and all the details of the law, the ablutions and so on, very strict, very disciplined. This is what the Pharisees did. But the love of God is put neat and tidy into a formula to fulfil

"Keep these commandments,"

then Moses said,

"and you will live long and prosper."

And nothing wrong with that, but by Jesus' day, that had become a very strict formula. And the other thing too is neighbour. You see that development beginning, which is fulfilled to a large degree in the prophets who build on that,

and then Jesus blows it all into universalism. You see it developing with Moses when he says,

"The stranger who lives among you or who are the slaves, you must treat them the same under the law"

but strictly speaking the understanding of neighbour was your fellow believer only. And there are some religions as today still believe this, that your only real neighbour is those who share the faith with you, and you can ignore all the rest. But Moses, you see, creeping in, the stranger among you. So he's seeing this law has another application beyond the boundaries of the faith and faithful of Israel.

That's the seed in what we would say is the development that Christ picks up. And I've always said this, thank God for the reformation because it made us rethink a lot of things, even though we'd allied ourselves with the empire and all sorts of things and got ourselves into a mess as a church. Our own tradition has an element of that, allied with Christendom and all the nations that were Christianized and the crusades. We didn't have to love them because they were not our neighbours. They didn't share our faith. But we would say we've abandoned that because Christ's message is much more fundamental, and we always need a reformation to bring us back to the real teaching of Jesus. When you look at the original reformation, it's interesting because it was all about faith and then this love of neighbour was lost sight of. So Calvin, over in Switzerland, set up a society that he called the Christian Society that he based on the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament. So it was a pretty horrible place to live if you committed adultery or stole. The punishments you got were really severe. It wasn't a very just system. And Luther himself, for whom I have great admiration, he preached freedom through the Gospel. It was almost on the edge of the embryo of liberation theology. But when the German peasants rose up demanding justice for their situation, he was horrified. He told the state authorities to crush them at all cost. He didn't want society changed at all. He just wanted to reject Catholicism and establish the true faith, Lutheranism. And so we see that reformation needs to go deeper because it affects who is the God we have to love and worship, and who is my neighbour, and how do I treat them.

Now the answer is always fundamentally in the Gospel, and we are always called back to revisit and reassess our approach to these things. And if I asked you to do anything, if you've got a bible at home, I challenge you just to read Matthew's Gospels chapter five to chapter seven, just three chapters. It's almost like a pamphlet size, but it's Jesus' manifesto on all these things and is best expressed by Matthew in these chapters. Matthew preserved the most teaching of Jesus on the ethics and the relationship between God and neighbour. Chapter five starts with the Beatitudes, and it moves on from there

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'If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the Scribes and the Pharisees', that's revolutionary. Because the Scribes and the Pharisees were fulfilling the law and therefore thought they were loving God. So he's saying something absolutely revolutionary. And it's so powerful if you read chapters five, six and seven of Matthew, that Mahatma Gandhi, when he read them, said,

"If I met a Christian who obeyed that, I'd become one too."

That's how challenging it is. And so, somebody so powerful as him saying that. And Mahatma Gandhi thought Jesus was a superb teacher. And so the reformation we always need to face in ourselves is challenged by those three chapters. Who is the God that I love? Is it the God I've made in the image and likeness I'd like him to be? Or is it the true living God as revealed by Jesus? And what's my approach to other people in sense of them being a neighbour?