

Homily 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (18.11.18)

Catholic Christianity, a rock in a turbulent sea of change, uncertainty, relativism & aggressive atheism

Jesus says strange words in that prophecy in the Gospel. It's interesting, because when he said the sun will be dark, the stars disappear and so on, of course, he was scientifically correct, because it's been proven now that our universe is winding down, and eventually the sun will explode, and it will all disappear. But you don't have to worry, it's not imminent. But the big thing for Jesus was he said,

"Nobody knows when this will happen, not even me."

And he mentions the fig tree as a sign, looking at the signs of the times. And I got fascinated by this because it was a phrase taken up in the 2nd Vatican Council, especially in the document 'The Church Today', after John XXIII quoted it in *Pacem in Terris*, that we need to read the signs of the times, recognising the world in which we live. And I re-looked, I scanned over that document, and I was amazed. It's nearly 60 years ago, of course, 1966 when it was published. And I was amazed how relevant it still is today. The Bishops didn't give any cheap solutions, but they highlighted certain things: The hopes and aspirations and anxiety of the world and how we should engage with it when we read the signs from our Christian perspective of understanding the Gospel values.

But they named three areas that they said were challenging, to use the modern word, they didn't use that word, it's too modern, the problematic, if you like. **The first** was the profound and rapid change that the then 20th century had seen, and we can imagine what's happened since then. And they mentioned how it creates uncertainty, and I was fascinated, without actually mentioning migration, they said the cultural mix that's been created by movement of people and the problems that that brings with clash and conflicting forces. And the understanding of law, they said the whole collapse of any understanding of what is right and wrong. But the one that struck me, if you think again, it was 1965, and you think of what's happened in our world, and I think it's still relevant – the problems with modern communications and technology. They said it's brought about, and they used two unusual words to describe the problem, it's brought

about socialisation; in other words connecting people, but not personalisation. And, by that, they define personalisation as creating solid relationships, that despite all this vast communication, people are not socialising in a personal way, but in a media way. And what do we see on iPhones and Facebook? Our children's connectedness [socialisation] through texting but no personal relationships?

The **second** issue they thought was a challenge was the psychological, moral and religious changes, and in particular the sense of relativity, that everything is relative, it's a personal opinion, whereas it's much more fundamental to the psyche of human nature and the well-being of man that we get to grips with these issues.

And **the third** thing they highlighted was imbalances in the world. And they mentioned in particular that despite the greatest aspirations of men and women in wanting to build a better world, the dichotomy between the rich and the poor nations that have got advancements and those that are regressed because of poverty is huge and debilitating in the quest of furthering a better world.

These, they say, are some of the signs of the times that they see, and I don't think those signs have changed. They mentioned that we should engage with the world's values and challenge them where they clash with the Gospel, but build on those that unite us. And they mentioned a few areas which I'd just like to highlight that they thought were important for us as Christians, Catholic Christians, to work for in the world of work and our neighbourhoods. They start, which is very interesting, with upholding the dignity of the human person. And they don't actually mention this, but they talk about how that's been undermined. And we see today, of course, with the possibility of euthanasia and ending life, how relevant that statement of theirs is today, that we must all uphold the dignity of every human person and their unique existence.

The second thing which I found marvellous and so relevant today was the dignity of the human mind, I'd forgotten this all those years ago when I studied. And they said,

"This is God's great gift to humanity that reflects something of his image and likeness, and the mind has an intellect to work for truth and wisdom." But they felt that because of the modern structures, everything was being relativized and no sense that the human intellect can pursue these values anymore.

And the dignity of a moral conscience. And that's so true, isn't it? That in other words, it's not just a case of my individualistic ethic, what I believe to be right is right and so on, but a search for an objective truth around fundamental, unchanging laws that guide our actions and outcomes. And the excellence of liberty. And they didn't mean by that,

"Just do what you like", they meant actually people free from enslavement, from being trapped. And think about our modern issues with modern slavery. So this is still an issue that Catholic Christians must work to promote true liberty. A thing that you wouldn't see mentioned and think of immediately that they said was the most challenging issue for Catholic Christians, or Christians in general, was dealing with aggressive atheism. They saw this as an actual evil in the world that's creating a sense of religion has nothing to offer. And yet the very essence of religion is about the wholeness and completeness of the human destiny. Promoting the common good, and we've heard that from the bishops recently.

This sense of there is common ground, regardless of whether the person is a Christian or not. We can search and work for a society that promotes the common good of all. And then, finally, which I noticed and I think is very pertinent to today, is, they said, the interdependence of the person, the individual and society, and in particular, his or her responsibilities. That's what they highlighted, not rights, but that if society is to progress, if any sense of community or communion is to be found, it relies on being fully involved in society, by virtue of the obligations I owe to creating society. And that, I think, is a powerful demand on us all.