

Homily **22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C** (1.9.19)

Back in 1971, I was in seminary, and an Irish lad who I knew, I was very friendly with, said,

"Come and listen to this BBC production called 'An Irish Country Priest's Ash Wednesday Mass'."

The priest was Father Green - a country priest In Southern Ireland. And it was obvious when you listened to it, that the BBC went out there thinking they'd have a laugh at this backward country priest, who was in this small village in the middle of nowhere, but in reality he ran rings round them. And it became obvious when they questioned him that he was well-read and he corrected them on a lot of things. I remember the BBC presenter saying,

"What do you think about the troubles in Northern Ireland?"

The priest replied,

"Terrible, terrible, terrible. You know, G. K. Chesterton once said, 'It's not that Christianity has failed, but it hasn't been tried yet.' Now wasn't that a clever thing to say."

The BBC man was stumped.

However, I digress, because I wanted to highlight the fierce sermon for Ash Wednesday. And at the end of the sermon the BBC man said to him,

"Your sermon was a bit strong wasn't it?"

He said,

"Look here, you come from that sophisticated place called London. These folk want a bit of fire."

And that reminded me of the second reading, the letter to the Hebrews. Fire, thunderstorms, voices, trumpets. And these symbols, these symbols of God's revelation of himself, seems to be prevalent in the Old Testament. Because the sense of the holy, was don't touch. And people had to prostrate themselves in the presence of God's revelation. In fact there's a section missed out of that reading, which says,

"If animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death. No one except Moses can approach the mountain."

So, this powerful symbol, was a way of getting across to a group of people, the power and presence of God.

But you know, there are little snippets in the Old Testament, of something different, something of a different approach to the symbolism that represents God. You get it in Elijah at the cave entrance when it says an earthquake happened. A thunderstorm happened. A fire came past. God was not in any of these. But then there was a small breeze and the hairs on the back of the neck and hands of Elijah stood up and he had to cover his face because he felt the presence of God in the symbol of this gentle breeze.

And I would recommend you to read the letter to the Hebrews, it's only a small book in the New Testament, but the author, probably St. Paul, but we don't know for certain, was obviously addressing all those who knew the Old Testament, in particular the Jewish converts. And he wanted to show how

Christ had transformed the revelation given in the first dispensation of the Old Testament, and how it was not just full-filled in him but corrected by him, where things, as it were, had gone off kilter.

Just as a by-product, I don't know whether you noticed, when you were following your reading, that it says where everyone is gathered 'is a first born son' in inverted commas in the written text. And that's because the author knew in the Old Testament dispensation, the giving of the law, which this introduction was about, that the law said that the only person who inherited was the first born son, everybody else lost out. And it was a very patriarchal society where the males dominated. And what the letter to the Hebrews is saying is revolutionary. He's saying when you come to the Eucharist, because this text is Eucharistic in tone, we've gathered with all the angels and saints, and he says they're present when we celebrate the Eucharist, the church in the past, the church to come, the church throughout the world is present, we're in communion with a huge group of people. And he says,

"When you gather, everyone present is a first born son."

And what he's saying is that Jesus, as the first born risen from the dead, has made us all adopted children of God and when it comes to the law, God looks upon us as if we were all first born with the right of inheritance. And that has powerful consequences, because it means when we approach the Eucharist we shouldn't be comparing ourselves with others. The author is implying that God looks upon you and me when we approach the Eucharist as his special first born. That you are unique and that God loves you in your own right.

And we lose these symbols at our peril. You know people have lost a sense of symbols, because a symbol is more of a sign. When you kiss your husband or spouse or child or mother that is a symbol. You don't kiss someone and say that was just a sign of my affection, do you? I just gave you a sign. It creates affection, that's what a symbol is. A symbol is a sign that creates that which it signifies. And we lose this sense of symbols in everyday life at our peril, because of the power of presence that they convey in our faith.

So the symbols of bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Christ and given to me, these are God's love for me, like the gentle breeze in which Elijah experienced the presence of God. Not in thunder and external wonders, but through faith in the sign that becomes the symbol of God's love for me as his first born.