

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

There was a time, of which even the most long-lived of the clergy have only the vaguest of memories, when the bishop issued a programme of subjects on which they were asked to preach on Sunday. The subjects selected by His Grace/Lordship were rarely if ever related to the gospel of the day. They covered many of the topics with which the Catholic who had completed primary school would have been familiar from his/her catechism class and on which they had been examined by the diocesan inspector before making their First Communion or Confirmation. The subjects were predictable: the Ten Commandments, the Sacraments, and some of the basic facts about the life of Jesus. And the bishop saw to it that his clergy preached on these subjects again and again just in case the laity in the pews had forgotten. In many ways this episcopal *diktat* made life easy for the priests, it certainly did not challenge their imagination.

Vatican II and the liturgical reforms introduced now over half a century ago changed all of that. The focus of preaching from now on was the scripture readings of the day, arranged in a three-year cycle for Sundays and a two-year cycle for weekdays in such a way as to create a greater variety of readings but also opening up parts of the Sacred Scripture that had never been heard in church before, or at least not since patristic times. An essential preliminary to this exposure to the scripture is that it be well read and that the text itself be reasonably accessible to the average parishioner. Over the years we have worked hard at training readers and giving them the self-confidence to read in public for their peers. Over those same years we have become familiar with the scriptures, not read to us in the original Hebrew or Greek, but in an English which is fresh, clear and contemporary. We use the Jerusalem Bible, a translation admittedly done at a particular time and in a cultural context which was peculiar to it, but what is important is that it is the one that three generations of English-speaking Catholics have got accustomed to. It is at our peril that we casually discard it.

Some bishops may claim that another translation is “better” or more faithful to the original, and because vernacular languages evolve and change it is possible that the translation of the scriptures will be an issue, regardless of the language, every fifty years or so. To some extent, unlike the lists of topics given by bishops to their priests in a by-gone age, each Sunday’s gospel and thus each Sunday homily is stand-alone. Except for Advent and Lent, the gospels are not necessarily thematically connected. Each week we catch a glimpse of Jesus in a particular setting and of the impression he made on his contemporaries. Most of us are curious as to the impression the incidents to which the scripture make us privy make on us, in the here and now, in these pandemic times, in the dilemmas with which the society of today confronts his disciples. In many ways there is no thematic continuity from one Sunday to the next. What matters is that the Word of God we hear today is proclaimed clearly, is understood easily and is “broken” in such a way that it speaks to us where we are today. It is important not to forget that it is always alive and active.

Father Patrick