

Fifth Sunday of Eastertide Homily



For us Catholics the word ‘Reformation’ has tended to be a bit of a dirty word, especially The Reformation. You do not find Luther’s picture up on many Catholic school walls, possibly in a secondary school History class or Religion classroom, but not usually to celebrate his life. (More likely to find Guy Fawkes.) But the Church’s history has always been one of continuing reformation. Both church institutions and religious orders have been being reformed since the beginning. It is natural if you think about it. The Church is here for a mission, and as humans following Jesus we build communities for that mission. But also as humans we often settle after a while into a way of doing ‘mission’ in which the structure of the community gets too settled. For example, many of us began as Irish Catholics new to England and we had a clear role, the mission was to support the new community, but that is no longer the case. When the need changes, reformation, renewal is needed. Each age calls on us to preach the same gospel but in way that is fitting to the needs of the people of that age. We have to listen to the Spirit to guide us as to how we hold onto the essentials of our faith while adjusting to the questions and needs of the people of our day. In the light of all this you could say that the Councils of the Church, like the Vatican Council, are reforming moments in the church’s life.

How do we find our new way? Well, one of the ways for renewal is often going back to the beginning. Instead of ‘What would Jesus do?’ more ‘What did the early Church do?’ ‘How did they act in response to the new message of the gospel?’ ‘What did they make of the ideas of Resurrection in their lives?’ ‘How can we learn from them?’ So it is not just happy coincidence that at Easter, when Spring is upon us and the hawthorns are blossoming up on Scout Scar, and the trees are turning green, that with this sense of renewal in nature, we start to read the life of the early Church as well. We should always be ready to think of what needs renewing. The temptation is to start with the church and we often have a list of what is wrong with it, but in fact we should really begin with ourselves. It is only in a spirit of humility that we can begin to reflect on what the Church might need, and to accept that, though it has its faults, the Church also has a great deal of wisdom.

One of the lessons from the early Church is that people were just like us. In the first reading they are a small, pretty fragile, often scared group. You would have needed a good deal of the power of the Spirit to think of stepping into a meeting with the great persecutor, Saul. Saul's wonderfully enthusiastic, perhaps overwhelming, trust in the Spirit, where he marches in to preach to the Hellenists, Greek-speaking Jews, who want to kill him, would have been too much for some, and even frightening. Fortunately there is often a Barnabas in a parish to calm the Saul's and encourage the timid.

What each age is trying to work out is what does being a Christian mean for that time. Part of the answer is looking at the signs of the times, part in what are the foundations, the core and unchanging beliefs of a Christian.

In the gospel one thing is clear, we have to be rooted in, or grafted onto Christ, to succeed. If that is not the case we will fail. How this plays out in our lives and the church needs guidance, both of our own consciences and from the Church. Why the Church? Because otherwise, and remembering we are the Church, part of the vine, we just do what pleases us, rather than paying attention to the whole community. We cannot be a Christian on our own, we have to be part of the vine.

What the gospel also has to say to us is that we cannot live as Christ wants unless we understand that we are family members of the home of God. Living in God's family and home. Three times Jesus repeats in the gospel that the Father will make his home with us, that we should remain in him. As the second reading said, we have to believe in the name of Jesus Christ, and love one another, and if we do we live in God and God lives in us, we cannot fail.

All the time we need to be thinking of what this calls from us. We have to stop and reflect 'How does what we do now match with what is being asked of us? We must never forget that we have a mission to spread the gospel, but that only works if we at home, we are one with God, and that we love one another, and are alive to the needs of others.

The peace of the early Church came, not from avoiding persecution, but trusting in God and knowing that the Holy Spirit was within them as a community and in each of them. We are not likely to face direct persecution, perhaps the idea of change is just as threatening to us. But we always need renewal. We need to listen to the Spirit and to each other. As a headteacher recently quoted Fr. Timothy Radcliffe: 'We are called to live the tension between the convictions of the Church and the questions of the world.'