

FR HUGH'S HOMILY FOR 2nd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

When a Man U fan is looking at a Liverpool fan, or for that matter a Blackpool fan looking at a Preston fan (not quite so many of us), they don't often pause and say, "that person is a temple of the Holy Spirit." (Not the first thing that comes to mind anyway.) True of an Israeli looking at a Palestinian so often, or Russian and Ukrainian, or, in many places, a white person looking at a black person, and vice versa.

We might talk about celebrating diversity, but we are not so good at living up to it.

And yet we do believe in it. The Holy Spirit is within each one of us, as the second reading said. Ready to be recognised in us through baptism if our family are so inclined, or we accept this later in life. The Holy Spirit is within regardless. Regardless of what? Of whatever adjectives we might use to describe each other.

There was a TV programme about a pilgrimage, this time to Rome, and they were wondering, the eight or so pilgrims, if they would meet the Pope. They were a very varied mix, chosen to make it more interesting to watch, and one was a comedian who was also black and gay. He was worried about the meeting, but when he was in it he asked the Pope if he could accept him as he was. The Pope said, 'I always try to begin with the person first, and then come to the adjectives which we use to catalogue people later.'

And that is our problem, we so often look the adjectives and not the person.

I want to touch on something that has caused discussion recently, and that is whether people in a same-sex relationship can receive a blessing.

The first thing to say is that the Church's teaching has in no way changed as to what marriage, as understood by the Church, is. A lifelong bond between a man and a woman, growing in love and open to having children.

So why make a further statement now? Because the Church always has to respond to movements in society, not always to agree with them, and same-sex relationships are now common as many of our families know, so firstly, how do we respond formally as a Church, and also because this has given rise to real problems in other Christian communities, and also because we cannot condone in any way the harsh response in some countries in Africa and elsewhere.

So what is a blessing? Blessings express our relationship with God sometimes, in the Bible, as God blessing individuals, or, in the New Testament, Jesus blessing his Father in thanks, or us calling on God to bless someone who needs God's help in some way.

The letter from the Vatican says they come in two forms. A formal, liturgical, way within a set Rite that 'gives glory to God for his gifts, asks for favours, and seeks to restrain the power of evil.' And we come across this in Church and formal settings.

But there is another way blessings happen when we seek a blessing more informally for help with all sorts of different things and people in our lives. We are not perfect beings, but we come to God, as sinners often if not always, asking God's help in a more informal way. Someone seeking help or needing God's help in our lives.

So what the Church is saying now is that a formal marriage can never be recognised between two people of the same sex, yet individuals always have the right to ask for a blessing in their lives regardless of their state.

Practically, the Vatican makes clear, this can never have the rite or form of a marriage, or be within a situation that might make it look like a marriage as the Church understands it, but people can ask for a blessing for help in their lives at any time. I can understand that some people may feel there could be confusion here, but as in the gospel, Jesus makes it clear that finding out who he is is a journey, 'come and see,' he says. This is one part of our journey as a Church.

We are called to love and to welcome, just as Jesus sat and ate and talked with all sorts of people. Part of our life as a Church is to find out how we do this best.