

Fr Hugh's Homily for 4th Sunday in Lent

Sevilla football team were failing. The successes of the recent seasons just didn't seem to be happening, and even relegation was becoming a possibility. In a very much lower league, say the Andalusian Boveril league, a young man of 23, Romero, was enjoying his football but even though modest would have loved to be in the top league. A scout spotted him and he came up to the next league, then the next, until someone said to a scout for Sevilla, "You know you've been looking for inspiration, take a look at young Romero." So there he is now, in the top league. Scoring goals, encouraging the team with his enthusiasm, and bringing them out of the relegation spot.

More relevantly to the Church, way back at the beginning of the twentieth century a young peasant lad in Italy felt called to the priesthood. As time passed he moved up through the church's ranks until he became one of the most well-loved Patriarchs of Venice. Late on in life, as a stop-gap while they looked at others, he became Pope, and as John XXIII, much to everyone's surprise, he changed the church's life as he called and opened the Second Vatican Council. He never saw it close, but became a saint.

Renewal, saving, comes from some strange and unexpected places, and we need to be open to that in our own lives and in our world. And never lose hope in that.

In the first reading, out of the blue, the new King of Persia, a Gentile and fierce one at that, a great warrior, decrees that the Jews can return from Exile in Babylon and rebuild their Temple. God working through a Gentile much to the surprise of the Jews. Religious freedom from a foreign king.

Now Nicodemus would know that story well. He was part of the religious establishment, and well settled, well respected in society, secure in his life, his position and knowledge of the scriptures.

Yet he has sensed something in this man, Jesus. Nicodemus is an honest man and open to the truth when he finds it. But this man, Jesus, is a simple carpenter's son from the backwater of Galilee, probably with a Galilean accent. It is the last place he would expect a teacher to come from, and yet he calls on Jesus on the basis of the teaching of Jesus he has heard.

But he comes at night. He is testing the ground. He does not want to be seen in the company of a rabble rouser, of which there were many at the time. He is not declaring himself for Jesus yet.

And Jesus says something that shakes him, just before the passage we have here. Jesus says to him: 'To really find the right path to God you have to start again. Be born again.' What Jesus is saying is that all the wisdom you think you have now has to be completely re-evaluated. Not that his study of the Law and the scriptures is wrong, but it is not taking him in the right direction, until he is born again. He can no longer rely on the certainties of life, what he thought they were, he has to allow the Holy Spirit to carry him where God wants him to go. Surrender those certainties and place himself in God's hands. Worshipping now in Spirit and in Truth, no longer focused on the Temple, which seemed at the time of their conversation so indestructible yet which the listeners to the gospel would know has already been destroyed in 70 A.D.

So what can Nicodemus rely on? Where does he now base his faith? And it is here where Jesus starts to introduce him to the mystery of the Cross. He takes Nicodemus back to the Old Testament that he knew so well, an old certainty, and the story of the serpent on the cross that saved people in Israel's ancient history, to a new Cross that would be the salvation of the whole world.

Jesus, the Messiah (much to Nicodemus's surprise and probably horror at first at such blasphemy), and his own death to save the world. Here we have one of the most famous statements of the New Testament: 'God loved the world so much, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him, may not be lost but may have eternal life.'

The question Nicodemus is left with is, can he believe this? Can he restart his whole life-belief up to the present and those old certainties? Can he believe that this carpenter's son from Galilee can be the Messiah? Can he believe the Messiah would die such an ignominious death to save us?

Questions we are left with too.