

## FR HUGH'S HOMILY FOR 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

When Pope Francis sent out a letter in his last years about how to welcome people living on the fringes of the Church, those who, because of who they are and their way of life, find themselves excluded from the sacraments for example, there was an uproar from some teachers of the faith. ‘Why has the Pope not given us clear guidance on how to teach on these matters?’ ‘Is he changing the doctrine of the faith?’

No, is the answer. What the Pope was asking the Church, us, to do was to be more open to people who find themselves in this situation. To be more welcoming. It was a challenge for some.

When St. Paul talks to the poor in his letter today he does not always mean the financially poor. He also means those struggling with their role in society. Those who society excludes because it dislikes their way of life.

We find a distinction in our law too. Anglo-Saxons (us and others) tend to right laws strictly so that they are followed to the letter. In Roman Law areas, Europe for example, laws are written often as a guide, an aim. You notice this when driving in Rome! Or when laws are written by the European Community about food for example. Often in Europe it was a guide, here we went crazy trying to enforce all the little bits of them. Straitening bananas!

So today in the gospel Jesus goes up the mountain, more like a hill in real life, to teach about the laws that guide his new community.

In the Bible when people go up a mountain, like Moses, it is to receive and then teach God’s law. As with the Ten Commandments. This is the foundation of God’s Covenant, agreement, with his people, the newly free people of Israel.

And in the gospel today, St. Matthew deliberately puts this story about Jesus proclaiming his Beatitudes near the start of his mission and on a hill, because these are going to be the guidelines for his Church, of the new Covenant.

As I said, Paul encouraged his poor congregation in Corinth, who were mainly from the bottom of society, by saying, God has deliberately chosen you. You are his people, his workers if you like. You are the very people chosen to be his messengers. They had never before been told something like this. Their importance to someone.

But when the Beatitudes begin with ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit,’ here he is not talking about class distinctions, because everyone is equal in this new community, which is in itself a radical new idea for them. What he is talking about here is a humility of spirit, whoever you are. It is about an inner attitude of heart. Harder for the rich and powerful, certainly. It is about realising that before God none of us can claim any distinction, any rich or powerful position.

Before Christ there was very little understanding of a faith like this. There were a few that came close. But the idea of total equality before the Lord, of the spiritual value for all of those who hunger or thirst, of being peacemakers, and especially meek, was new.

I once had the good fortune to be able to read and reflect on the Beatitudes at the very place they were given. But we don’t have to be there. If you get the chance look them over again, this covenant for our Church, and even though they can be difficult and challenging, see what comes to you.