

Homily 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time 2023

“What I want is MERCY not sacrifice” (Mt 9:9-13) *

As we come to the end of The Liturgical Year it seems that The Lectionary Readings for Sundays in particular, are becoming more and more controversial and more challenging. What is clear from the last few weeks Gospel Readings is that Jesus is no ‘shrinking violet’ and speaks ‘straight from the shoulder’ with a wisdom beyond human understanding. In his outspokenness however, he seems always to have the care of the most vulnerable at heart and in his actions. I always, when faced with a dilemma, ask myself, ‘What would Jesus do in this situation?’

I have a friend, who lives in Scotland, who is a most devout Catholic and constantly serves the ‘little ones’ in her community - the poor, the elderly, the housebound. She visits prisoners, the sick, the disabled and raises thousands of £s to send vulnerable people to Lourdes. She accompanies the VIPs, as she calls these pilgrims, using her holiday time from work. She fell in love with a divorced man who wasn’t a Catholic. He had been divorced for many years before they met. Eventually, romance blossomed, and she married the man. They married in another Christian Church because her parish priest, informed by Church LAW, refused even to contemplate meeting them. He suspended her from any parish ministry including leading the Children’s Liturgy which she had done for many, many years. She was, above all else, devastated by the refusal of the priest to allow her Holy Communion. There was no offer of the more compassionate process of ‘internal forum’**, whereby an informed conscience decision regarding receiving The Sacraments can be made under the guidance of a priest. Despite this she continues to do good in her community, visits the sick and offers support to prisoners. She attends Mass and continues to accompany vulnerable people to Lourdes.

What would Jesus have done, I ask myself? When I look at today’s Gospel, we get a clue to Jesus’ thinking. He challenges the Pharisees and counsels the people to pay heed to the Covenant teaching they received from Moses but not to follow their example because, “...they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they!” Last Sunday Jesus was asked by The Pharisees, “What rabbi is the greatest commandment?” Jesus seeing their hypocrisy and yet another attempt to trick him replies, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and other all your mind and you must love your neighbour as yourself.” He avoided getting into discussion about the 613 laws and all the thousands of precepts the Pharisees expected the people to follow and simply said that we must love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.

In today’s First Reading Malachi, the last OT Prophet in 6th Century BC, is scathing of the behaviour of the priestly class of his day. They had become obsessed with legalism, harsh judgement of the people and status and he accuses them of empty ritual and disrespecting the altar of The Temple with impure and imperfect sacrifices. The historical context is The Chosen People’s had just returned from The Babylonian Exile and were in the process of rebuilding The Temple. Malachi rebuked them as they had forgotten the essence of The Mosaic Covenant relationship, to love God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their mind as God loves them.

In The Letter to Thessalonians in today’s Liturgy St Paul, in stark contrast, lovingly and full of mercy and tenderness addresses his flock saying, “Like a mother feeding and looking after her own children, we felt so devoted and protective towards you, and had come to love you so much, that we were eager to hand over to you not only the Good News but our whole lives as well. Let me remind you, brothers and sisters, how hard we used to work, slaving night and day so as not to be a burden on any one of you while we were proclaiming God’s Good News to you.” Paul is so full of love, understanding, compassion and mercy towards his Christian Community.

There are many fine priests and laity today who are increasingly frustrated by a frequently imposed strict legalistic approach to spiritual and pastoral care of the flock. Tied and bound by laws and rules which he finds a burden to his people, one Christ-like priest pleaded, ‘We have had years of law, we want love. We have had years of edicts, we want warmth. We have had years of doctrine, we want caring. We have had years of authority, we want mercy and synodality.’ Arguably, we could replace love, warmth, caring and mercy with JESUS. We just want JESUS, our Saviour. That same Jesus timely reminds all of us to, “Take the plank out of your own eye before taking the splinter out of your brother’s/sister’s.”

In respect of rules a very wise priest once counselled me, ‘Fools follow rules blindly, wise priests use rules for guidance. We are ALL, each of us, poor sinners in need of God’s mercy.’

So, what WOULD Jesus have done in my friend’s situation???

* Matthew's Jesus (Mt 9:13) most probably quotes this verse in line with the intention of Hosea. In both cases He uses Hos. 6:6 to condemn the rigid and inhumane attitudes of the Pharisees of his day. He accuses them of a lack of mercy towards people and knowledge of the will of God. (Hosea 6:6)

**Internal Forum

The internal forum is the process of using one's own informed conscience to make decisions. As a central concept in Catholic moral life, the Internal Forum process applies to all aspects of human moral decision-making, not just annulment and remarriage.

In cases of remarriage and annulment, Internal Forum is also called the "in good conscience solution". Contrary to the annulment-tribunal process, called the "External Forum", the Internal Forum does not involve any witnesses, psychological evaluations are not used, and the former spouse is not required to be involved. In other words, the Internal Forum is a far more compassionate and pastoral process than the annulment-tribunal External Forum Process.

In the most recent information to be announced by Rome, the Synod document of 2015 and Pope Francis' view of remarriage, defined "Internal Forum" as a way "to help remarried Catholics become conscious of their situation before God" and then decide how to move forward. The document goes on to state "conversations with a priest in Internal Forum contributes to the formation of a correct decision on what is blocking the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the church and on steps that might foster it and make it grow. For this to happen, the necessary conditions should be guaranteed of humility, discretion, and love of the Church and its teachings in the sincere seeking of the will of God and in the wish to give a more perfect response to it".

The Internal Forum process is a far more compassionate process toward remarriage than is the "External Forum" tribunal-annulment process.