

MIRABATUR PROPTER INCREDULITATEM EORUM

A Homily for the Fourteenth Sunday of the Year (B)

St Paul's Parish, Gävle, Sweden.

Texts: Ezek. 2:2-5; Ps. 122; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6.

“He was amazed at their lack of faith.” Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Gospel reading of today can be called the anticlimax to the tempo we have followed for the past two Sundays. Today we are presented with an audience that showed serious lack of faith. The Lord visited the place he lived – where he grew up. One would expect to see an energised crowd, people proud of their son for his profound teaching and the miracles. One would expect the people to show solidarity and praise him as one of their own. But what we read is the direct opposite of what one would expect. Rather than listen to the word of life that the Lord preached, the people were busy talking about their knowledge of him and his family. The Gospel tells us that because of their incredulity the Lord could not perform many miracles there except for a few sick people on whom he laid his hands and healed.

The Lord is calling on us to meditate on familiarity and faith. We who are Catholics run the risk of being so “familiar” with the liturgy that we lose the very faith we profess in the liturgy we celebrate. We know how to respond to all the parts of the Mass. We know most of the hymns by heart. We know that we should genuflect when we enter the Church. But we can get so used to the Holy Mass that we lose focus on the mystery we celebrate. This can happen also with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We can become so used to it that it becomes no more than a weekly tonic and miss the power that is in this Sacrament of healing.

Some years ago, I was invited to celebrate Holy Mass for the Missionary Sisters of Charity (Mother Teresa Sisters) in Stockholm. On the wall just above a table in the sacristy was a short admonition meant for the priest as he is vesting, written in both English and Swedish: “Holy priest, celebrate this Mass as if it were your first Mass, your last Mass, your only Mass.” No priest that I know would celebrate his first Mass casually or in a hurry. No priest would be careless over a Mass he knows would be his very last. But the helpful words of Mother Teresa are certainly not meant for priests alone. One could expand her admonition to read: “O child of God, attend this Mass as if it were your first Mass, your last Mass, your only Mass.”

The words of the holy nun are in accord with the meaning of the Eucharist. It is always new. This is because it is always a re-presentation of the Sacrifice of the Lord on the Cross. I cannot imagine a Catholic who would not pay attention if a film on the Crucifixion is being shown. Yet what happens during Mass is infinitely far more profound than the best of films. The Lord Jesus Christ offers himself (in an unbloody manner through the action of the priest). He offers the same one, unrepeatable Sacrifice of the Cross through which all our sins are washed away and we are set free from eternal damnation.

So, how do we know that we have the kind of faith that the Lord expects from us? The psalmist tells us. Here is what we sang:

*My eyes, like the eyes of slaves on the hand their lords,
Like the eyes of a servant of the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes are on the Lord our God till he show us his mercy*

The eyes of the slaves and maid servants rest on their lord and mistress because they owe them allegiance and expect material and perishable goods from them. But we trust in the Lord because he is our Maker and the Lord of all things. Our lives are in his hands. Our holiness is a free gift from him. We are his creatures, the work of his hands, and he can do with us as he wills.

Our Mother Mary is a model of faith. When the Angel Gabriel greeted her with the message from the God of Israel, she answered, ***“I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your will”*** (Lk. 1: 38). Our patron, St Paul, learnt that obedience to the will of God is of the essence of the faith he preached. He trusted in the Lord who could not deceive him. In the Second Reading of today he teaches us by his own experience what obedience of faith is. The Lord gave him spiritual gifts in abundance. But he also allowed him to experience an unremitting weakness, “a thorn in the flesh” that kept him humble and dependent on the Lord.

How shall we know what faith in the Lord means? Imagine being held down under water for ten minutes by two strong men, unable to breathe. While in this state your greatest need would be just one thing: air.

We will know that we have faith in God when we realise that we need him in our lives even more than we need air. If we so trust in the Lord, we will experience his abiding presence and know that with him all things are possible.

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