

24th Sunday in O.T. 2020

Among the official titles of the Pope is that of “Pontiff, a word that comes from the Latin “pontifex” meaning “bridge-builder”. Bridges span differences, they unite; the title “Pontiff” tells us that the Pope is a focus of unity in the Church – the faithful united with the Pope are therefore united with Christ. (*cf Ut unum sint, 94*) However, although “Pontiff” is an official papal title, in a very real sense every Christian is called by Jesus to be a “pontifex”, a bridge-builder in the Church and in the world. The present Holy Father, Pope Francis, frequently exhorts us to build bridges not walls! The followers of Jesus span differences, they are “servants of unity” - this is the understanding lying behind the answer of Jesus to Peter's question, “*How often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me?*”

The saints are the prime exemplars of this way of living and one of them, St Francis of Assisi, is a particularly good model for our modern world – he built bridges to the poor and the outcasts of society; he built bridges to the Moslem world and to the natural world, singing praises to God for the beauty of creation. The aim of Francis' life was to restore fraternity and harmony in society and in the world around him. In striving to do so, he demonstrated an extraordinary perception of the truth presented in the first chapters of the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis.

In chapter 2 of Genesis we are told how God “*planted a garden in Eden*” and filled it with every good thing and placed there Adam and Eve. This was called “Paradise”. Then in the next chapter we read how God's extraordinary plan for humanity unravelled. Adam and Eve decided to be masters of their own fate – in other words they would act without reference to their Creator. This is symbolized by their disobedience to God by eating of “*the tree of knowledge of good and evil*”. This decision of theirs we call “original sin”. Theirs was a declaration that the human will becomes the sole criterion for judging what is good and what is evil. When humanity, represented by Adam and Eve, turned away from God, the calamitous consequence was that the Garden of Eden, that place of extraordinary harmony and beauty, fell into chaos and disharmony. The first reading of today's Mass reminds us that resentment and anger, vengeance, hatred and ill-will, quickly became part of the human narrative, as did, even more tragically, fratricide.

After the story of the rebellion of Adam and Eve, the rest of the Bible is the record of God calling his people back to live in harmony with him and with one another. You and I, day-after-day, strive to respond to that call; our baptism publically enrolled us as God's friends, it makes us not just Christians, but earnest imitators of Christ – just like Francis of Assisi and all the other saints! Perhaps this sounds a tall order, but it is true, we too are called to be bridge-builders, that is saints; indeed it is said that the only real tragedy in life is not to become a saint! If we truly strive to imitate Jesus Christ then our faith demands that we commit ourselves to the restoration of fraternity and harmony in the world around us – within our family, in our place of work, in our neighbourhood, in our parish, and this must also include having a deep respect for the natural world.

The scriptures of this morning's Mass clearly point us in the direction in which we must go if we are to undertake this work of the restoration of harmony around us. The first reading pointedly asks if we bear “*resentment and anger*” towards another, nurse anger, hold ill-will. In doing so, the reading emphasises that forgiveness must be the basic attitude of the Christian, after all, don't we say everyday in The Lord's Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”? Forgiveness not only restores harmony around us, but restores it in our own hearts; someone has said, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover that the prisoner was you”! In order that our prayers are not contradicted by the way we live, the prayer on our lips must first be the prayer in our hearts. It is the radical willingness to be like Jesus in all our relationships, that marks out the Christian – that makes us true bridge-builders! Peter asked Jesus, “*Lord, how often must I forgive?*” But if we are still counting how many times we have forgiven someone we haven't really forgiven them at all! “*Seven times*”, Peter suggested; Jesus' response is, “Don't even think about counting; just do it!”

With St Francis we pray:

"Make me a channel of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me bring your love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy." Amen.