29th Sunday in O. T. 2024

Jesus instructed his disciples “*Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations* – *and they, going out, preached everywhere” (Mt.28:19; Mk.16:20).*

The last census revealed that Church attendance in Northern Ireland declined markedly since the [Good Friday Agreement](https://www.rte.ie/archives/2018/0405/952385-good-friday-agreement/). In 1999, 77% of Catholics and 52% of Protestants attended religious services on a monthly or more frequent basis. Ten years later the monthly attendance for both Catholics and Protestants dropped to around 46%. In the Republic, monthly or more frequent mass attendance [declined](http://wid.world/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/WorldInequalityLab_WP2021_01_EuropePolCleavages.pdf) from about 80% to 28% in the same time. In the UK, there are now more people of no religion than there are those of any religion, and [less than 15%](https://www.whychurch.org.uk/trends.php) attend religious services on a monthly basis.

Jesus said, “*Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations* – *and they, going out, preached everywhere”.*

Many of us are acutely aware of the falling church-going numbers, and at the same time are perplexed as to what to do about it – such uncertainty can cause us to scramble around looking for an “easy fix”. But experience has taught us that there is no “easy fix” – and yet the Lord’s voice is persistent, *“Go, make disciples of all nations”.*

Perhaps, we too quickly, confine the Lord’s words, *“make disciples”,* to teaching and preaching – something which is asking too much of most. The late Pope Benedict XV1, reminded us that, “It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction”. Pope Francis has said, “A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain, and in love, will convince nobody” *(EG 15; 266).*

We live in a society which has become very utilitarian; everything is judged on its perceived usefulness – that which doesn’t seem useful is discarded. For example, we have often heard it said, perhaps by our own teenage children, “I get nothing out of the Mass, so why should I bother going?” In fact, that question “Why should I bother?”, has become the response of a whole generation to the challenges of faith. A well-known Catholic lay-woman, Barbara Ward, once commented, “Faith will not be restored to the West because people believe it to be useful. It will return only when they believe it to be true”.

In today’s Gospel passage we encounter two disciples who saw in Jesus an opportunity - *“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached Jesus. 'Master', they said to him 'we want you to do us a favour.'”* They saw in Jesus the way to climb the ladder of perceived success. In asking for a favour the two brothers revealed their self-centredness - *“Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory”,* so as to be men of influence!

Faith is always distorted when religion is used in a way that tries to convince God to do what we want, rather than seeking God’s will for our lives. We can be tempted to approach God in prayer as James and John approached Jesus, “*we want you to do us a favour.”* Jesus himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane, modelled for us the core of true prayer, *“Not my will, but thy will be done” (Lk.22:42).*

Having listened to James and John’s request, Jesus, with great calmness, spoke of the way which would characterise his Kingdom – that is, love that does not count the cost. Later the disciples would realise that he was pointing to the cross. This would be the way which, in time, they too must take. He said, *“Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?”* Jesus’ challenge was, “how much are you prepared to sacrifice, even to suffer, for the sake of love?

It is not surprising that the Gospel passage comments on the indignation of the others – James and John, by seeking honours for themselves, were excluding the other ten from honours of which they thought they were deserving! So, Jesus called all twelve to himself to explain to them that he *“had not come to be served but to serve”,* and in this they must follow him.

As today’s disciples, we are called to live our faith, “convinced, enthusiastic, certain, and loving”, and thus fulfil the Lord’s mandate *“Go, make disciples of all nations”.*  But how can we do this? We can do it by the way we live in the apparently ordinary situations of life - for example: “Are you married? Be loving and caring for your spouse. Are you a parent or a grandparent? Be loving by teaching your children to follow Jesus and by praying with them. Are you a son or daughter? Be loving by honouring your parents, as Jesus honoured Mary and Joseph. Are you working in a trade or profession? Be loving by working with integrity and skill in the service of others. Are you in a position of influence? Be loving by working for the common good, rather than merely for personal gain. The true disciple always stands in the shadow of the cross – love without limitation involves sacrifice – such love is his message, and ours to bring to the world.

*“Lord Jesus,*

*may your cross standing before us,*

*always remind us, that like you,*

*we too are called to be loving servants.”* **Amen.**