

5th Sunday in Easter 2021

How often do you quote from the Bible in your everyday conversations? It may come as a surprise, but you probably do it much more frequently than you imagine! Here are just a few of the many the biblical proverbs that have found their way into our everyday conversations: “*Bite the dust*”, - Psalm 72; “*By the skin of your teeth*”, - The Book of Job; “*The fly in the ointment*”, - The Book of Ecclesiastes, and, “*The blind leading the blind*”, found in the Gospel of St Matthew.

Another biblical proverb that must have been very much in the minds of the Apostles when they heard that the one-time ferocious persecutor, Saul, whom we know as Paul, had become a believer in Jesus. This particular proverb is found in the Book of Jeremiah, Chapter 13, verse. 23, and it asks, “*Can a leopard change its spots?*” The Apostles suspected, when they heard of Saul’s conversion, that it was a surreptitious trick on his part to infiltrate the community. The first reading of this Sunday’s Mass tells us that, “*When Saul got to Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him; they could not believe he was really a disciple.*” Without doubt the Apostles asked one another, “*Can a leopard change its spots!*”

But the truth was that this particular leopard had changed his spots; Paul had encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. But his sudden conversion was just too much for the Apostles to comprehend. None of them had experienced a sudden conversion; their faith in Jesus had grown painfully slowly, in fits and starts. Indeed, that is how it is for the vast majority of believers; few of us experience the sudden blinding light of God’s revelation as Paul did. There is a beautiful poem by John Betjeman which puts it rather well:

“What is conversion? Not at all
For me the experience of St. Paul,
No blinding light, a fitful glow
Is all the light of faith I know
Which sometimes goes completely out
And leaves me plunging into doubt....”

It is true that the trials and tribulations of life, that invariably come our way, often leave us “plunging into doubt”, causing that “fitful glow”, which is our faith, to flicker, and even threaten to go “completely out”. Such situations may be brought about by some personal crisis, for example, a betrayal in a relationship, or by the pain of grief; or by deep disappointment caused by scandals in our Church. These are the kind of experiences which, in the words of Betjeman, “leaves me plunging into doubt...”

However, Betjeman, in his poem, moves on from doubt to share with us how he personally recovers his faith. As he does so he acknowledges an obvious human difficulty with his chosen path, one which we all experience. He says;

“Until I will myself to go
And worship in God’s house below -
My parish church – and even there
I find distractions everywhere.”

When you and I gather in our Parish Church, we do so, bringing with us all our worries, plans and the hundred and one other concerns that crowd into the day. As we look around the Church, we see friends and those “I must have a word with”, and wonder “who is that?”, and there’s Mrs So-and-So, isn’t she looking well?”, or perhaps, “there is your man from down the street, isn’t he badly failed?”; then we find ourselves wondering, “What is the priest rambling on about!” How accurate Betjeman is when he observes, “My parish church – and even there I find distractions everywhere.”.

Yet, while we acknowledge that distraction is one reality of being in “my parish church”, there is too another reality. In spite of all our distractions, we focus during Mass, perhaps only fitfully, on Jesus Christ our Lord, and know that we are gathered around him - in Betjeman words, “Turning round to gaze upon a love profound”. It is a remembering of “*I am the vine, you are the branches.*” In spite of our all too human distractions the bond of that “love profound” holds sure; “*the true vine*”, which is, the crucifix, is the witnesses of that astounding truth.

We in St Brigid's, are proud of our beautiful church building, and rightly so, it is a splendid construction. But the true beauty here is that which is seen by the eye of faith alone, that is our communion with Jesus Christ and with one another: *"Make your home in me, as I make mind in you....those who remain in me, with me in them, bear fruit in plenty"*. Our weekly gathering here reminds us that, *"our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active"*.

Can a leopard change its spots? Paul did – and so can we, if we *"live the kind of life God wants."* Betjeman concludes his poem acknowledging that living the kind of life God wants is a real challenge for him, as it is for you and me. But his poem is also a prayer for *"the consolation of the Holy Spirit."* He writes:

“For some of us see Jesus plain
And never once look back again.
And some of us have seen and known
And turned and gone away alone,
But most of us turn slow to see
The figure hanging on a tree
And stumble on and blindly grope
Upheld by intermittent hope.
God grant before we die we all
May see the light as did St Paul.” **Amen**