

In the Gospel we have just heard Jesus say: "Let the dead bury the dead, it is for you to go and proclaim the kingdom". There's no literal sense we can give to the dead burying the dead, and even if Jesus was picking up some proverb He was actually wanting to describe some people. So who are these "dead" people? Well, he directly contrasts them with those who proclaim the gospel; therefore they are those who don't.

There's a way of being church that no longer proclaims the gospel effectively, and so to all intents and purposes is "dead". A church that clings to certain customs, titles, pecking orders, pedestals and prissiness – long after the world has outgrown the courtly life of ancient empires where those things originated – simply doesn't relate to people whose ideals include equality, inclusiveness, consensus making etc. If it is not relating, it is not evangelizing.

As far back as 1971, the International Theological Commission warned that the Church needs to resist the tendency to make of the priesthood a "separate caste". But it has taken a great crisis in our own day to wake us up to how destructive the clerical culture can be.

We need a new paradigm for the church; in fact, a very old one – straight out of the gospels: the "community of Jesus' disciples". If we ask people what is the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the word "church", we find that they still think of it in clerical terms. When the first thing they think of is the "community of disciples", then we shall be on our way to where we need to go.

Your generation is going to play a major part on this journey; I respect you for that and love you for it. There's no point in preparing yourselves for a church that's not going to be there! What's dead needs to be buried. If your spiritual formation is as it should be, your gospel instincts will give you a distaste for separatism and elitism; if your human formation is as it should be, you won't feel any need to prop up your self-image; if your pastoral formation is as it should be, you will want to cut out anything that is an obstacle to the gospel; if your theological formation is as it should be, you won't feel threatened by on-going development in the Church's self-understanding.

So how does the church as we know it morph into the community of disciples? By focusing uncompromisingly on what Jesus meant whenever He talked about the "kingdom". I am not saying the kingdom is the Church; it isn't; I am saying that when our attitude and action are formed by "kingdom" and "discipleship" we'll end up with the right kind of Church.

On this journey, you will still hear and read about "turmoil", "clericalism", "allegations", drift from the Church...But my message to you is this: you won't feel oppressed or overwhelmed by that stuff if you see it all through the lenses of salvation history. Salvation history illustrates, over and over, that it is precisely through the experience of human failure and sin that the Mercy of God is best revealed, and that renewal comes out of the ashes of what needed to change. That's how God reveals that our salvation is pure gift, not something we could earn or deserve. And to make this clear, God allows the bad things to happen. After all, Good Friday shouldn't have happened either. But God allowed it to show that even when we have done our worst, God's mercy prevails.