

Homily for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

In the second letter to Timothy (1st reading), we are told that “God wants all to be saved” and that there is “only one mediator between God and the human race, namely Jesus”.

With the same bigness of mind, let us allow ourselves to ask: since Jesus is the one mediator, how is salvation achieved by all those (before Christ and since) who have never known him? Well, this is not really a problem because what God does for us is not ultimately dependent on whether we know it or not.

But there was a time when some Catholics believed there was “no salvation outside the Catholic Church”. That idea doesn’t take seriously the words we heard: “God wants all to be saved”, - including those who will never be Catholics!

But for us who are Catholics, responsibilities come with the privilege. An evangelizing disposition looks for new ways of reaching out. Reaching out to other Christians who are not Catholics is called ecumenism; reaching out to non-Christians is a matter of inter-faith relationships.

There are some Catholics who cannot cope with the idea of ecumenism – never mind that it has been promoted by all five of the most recent Popes. Ecumenism does not require the watering down of our Catholic faith. But it does take seriously Jesus’ prayer on the night before He died that all his disciples would be united. And it does require us to notice how the Holy Spirit is at work among other Christian people. Pope John Paul II was once asked by a journalist: if the Holy Spirit wants all Christians to be united, why did the Spirit allow Christianity to become divided in the first place? Pope Saint John Paul’s answer is worth noting: aspects of our faith in Jesus and his teaching and work have been able to surface better than they might have the way we were! How’s that different from the constant theme of salvation history (through both testaments and since) that it is often through our weakness and failures that God is able to teach us?

There are also Catholics who cannot cope with the idea of inter-faith relations – never mind that Pope St John Paul and Pope Benedict XVI both invited leaders of all the other faiths to come to Assisi with them – to stand alongside each other, each praying in the way that they believed right. Inter-faith relations does not involve worshipping false gods; it involves acting on the fundamental truth that we are all members of the human race before we are anything else, and all bound to worship God in the way we believe God expects, because that is how we shall all be judged!

Reaching out is being faithful to Jesus who came for all and reached out to all. It is ironic that those Catholics who object to working for Christian unity seem quite unscrupulous about creating dissension within the Catholic family itself!

Pope Francis has recently expressed concern about those Catholics – both lay and ordained – whom he describes as “rigid”; typically and charitably, he says we need to be gentle with them because they are working through their own problems. On the face of it, their actions can be seen as push-back against perceived, and sometimes real, aberrations. But behind this there is often their own appalling lack of understanding of the Catholic faith. And too often, the reason why they have not studied their faith more deeply is fear – fear of having to let go of something they are clinging to lest something happen to

them. And, of course, if they accepted the Pope's invitation to enter into real dialogue, they would have to let go of the kind of misunderstandings on which their criticisms are based.

One has to wonder at the Catholic up-bringing of those who would look to follow a schismatic archbishop or a couple of cardinals who already have track record of "rigidity" instead of following the Pope; that is so un-Catholic.

But we can't end on that note: in the midst of all that is cranky and gloomy there are so many signs of how the Holy Spirit is at work. We have a Pope who exudes the joy that is a sure sign of the gospel, and who reaches out bringing hope to so many; there are priests and bishops who are faithfully there, day in and day out, week in and week out, year in and year out, in the service of their people; [the disgrace that the actions of some bring upon us hurts, but it does not diminish our role, any more than the role of the apostles was diminished by the actions of Judas]; there are lay men and women whose humble, down to earth faith will not be taken from them – no matter what; and many who take up the call to be formed for greater participation in the life of the Church; and young people who are looking for ways to serve generously and wanting to make a difference... Let us be led by what the Holy Spirit is doing.

** Another way to understand how the Pope's critics have their own problems is well expressed by the late Fr Craig Larkin SM:

Most of us begin to learn our behaviours by conforming our actions to external rules or expressions. This is a normal part of upbringing. From our earliest years we hear phrases like "a good boy/girl does this", or "we don't do that in our family", or "these are the values of this school," or "Christian belief requires us to do this or that", or "our company's mission is.."

This is all totally appropriate as a way of beginning to assimilate values for living. The trouble with learning this way, however, is that we risk learning to act "from the outside in". We learn what is required of us in our external conduct and we conform our actions to that measure. But there is no guarantee that this way of behaving will become a part of our personal belief system. And if our ways of behaving do not come from an inner conviction, then in times of stress or pressure, the fabric of our external conduct breaks down.

It is true that rules of politeness and etiquette demand that we act or talk in certain ways at certain times. Sometimes our role or function or profession may require us to dress or act in certain ways. But there is always a risk that we identify with the role or the function or the way of dressing that accompany the task we do, and submerge our real identity under this *persona*...

We've all met people who act from the outside in. Titles, appearance, reputation have an inflated importance for them. Saving face or keeping up appearances becomes a major preoccupation. Real relationships aren't possible with these people because there is no "real" person to relate to. Carl Jung put it well when he wrote: "the brighter the *persona* the darker the shadow". We're all instinctively suspicious of the person who is too good to be true. There can be a flaw that has been carefully papered over...

There comes a time in our lives when we need to act from the inside out... Jesus acted "from the inside out". People noted the contrast between his conduct and the conduct of the Pharisees. When the Pharisees spoke, their words sounded hollow and went nowhere. When Jesus spoke,

his words came from inside his deepest self, and the people noted that “he spoke with authority”...