

niverse

## Parish AGM

### The Scandal of our time

It seems that some people have been encouraged by the two evening gatherings – one led by Carmody Grey about Laudato Si and the other by Julian Filochowski on Saint Oscar Romero – and are wondering what they might mean for us.

I think that is a fascinating question – what do they mean for us?

I came away from this room after listening to Carmody and wrote a few words down along the lines of: ***The universe kicked off about 14 billion years ago, with the big bang. A mere 6 million years or so ago, the first ape like creatures began to walk upright in East Africa. Then about 1000BC, the first texts of the Bible began to take shape, and Jesus was born 2000 years ago. John's Gospel tells us that: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...'. In other words, God has been speaking to us for billions of years in the rocks and the dust and the gases and the black holes and everything that has been going on 'out there' for millions and millions of years. The Word of God was speaking to us when the first single celled creatures staggered out of the primordial ooze and gradually became dinosaurs and roamed the earth. And God saw it and God's word said: 'This is very good'.***

***The whole of creation is an immense gift of God – not to us as humans so we can do what we like with it... - it is a gift of God expressing who God is. Pope Francis is telling us (LS161) that what we may be leaving to future generation is 'debris, desolation and filth'.***

***Pope Francis also tells us that; 'The world is God's loving gift...we are not disconnected from the rest of creation, but joined in a splendid universal communion'. (LS220). In other words, everything is holy, there is nothing that is not holy.***

I left with the challenge to develop a deeper relationship with the whole of creation, and to contribute in some way with the move to respect the earth, the planet and the whole of creation. I must say, I've yet to really discover what it is I have to do. I remember thinking that the chorus from one of the hymns really popular with the youngsters in our schools 'Our God is a Great Big God', has a massive message for us – if we'd only just ponder it a bit more.

After watching 'Righting the Wrong' and listening to Julian Filochowski I left St Roberts school with an even deeper admiration and respect for Oscar Romero – and a feeling of frustration with the Church in our country, nationally and locally, for the way we simply do not engage with the real issues of our time with the same passion and conviction as he did. One of the quotes in the Benedict Partnership Newsletter caught some of it for me:

***The main theme that emerged for me was that of change. Oscar Romero started out as quite a conservative priest, but he saw what was happening and he knew things had to change. When he looked at the poor and saw how they were suffering and the way they were so unjustly treated, that's what brought about the change in him.***

This quote led me in turn to recall a short paragraph in a document prepared by our Bishops' Conference in 1996 prior to the General Election in '97.

***It is time we reminded ourselves that in the spirit of good citizenship all members of the Catholic Church must accept their full responsibility for the welfare of society. We should regard the discharge of those responsibilities as no less important than fulfilling our religious duties and indeed as part of them. As bishops of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, however, we do not seek to engage in party politics in any form. We claim whatever rights and opportunities are available to us only in order to exercise an influence on behalf of whatever we believe to be true and good, especially in solidarity with people everywhere who are on low incomes, disabled, ill or infirm, homeless or poorly housed, in prison, refugees, or who are otherwise vulnerable, powerless and at a disadvantage.***<sup>1</sup>

Actually, in the second line of that document, Cardinal George Basil Hume says something so simply and yet so challenging: ***Religion is always personal, but never just a private affair.***

It is very true that Oscar Romero spent a good deal of his life as a conservative priest, though he was gradually becoming aware of the plight of the people in El Salvador and had taken dramatic steps to respond to the needs of the poor from time to time – by, for example, opening up the seminary for the poor of the countryside to find shelter when they came into the city to sell their produce.

What is certainly the case is that Romero's spirituality gradually evolved away from one which saw holiness equated with perfection and rigid observance of spiritual and ascetic practices – to a dynamic, faithful and prayerful searching for what God was asking of him; and he gradually began to identify the God of Jesus who lived in the suffering people of El Salvador.

What brought these two evenings together for me is a phrase from Pope Paul VI, canonised remember, on that same morning as Oscar Romero. In 1975 Paul VI published ***Evangelii Nuntandi – Proclaiming the Gospel***. It was his response to a Synod that had taken place the year before. In it, he says: ***The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt, the drama of our time, just as it was of other times.***

The Split between the Gospel and Culture is without doubt, the drama of our time...Pope JP2 once referred to it as the 'scandal' of our time. What does this mean?

Well, despite what you learned in school and what people like me suggest every week, there is, in fact, only one Gospel. There are NOT four Gospels, and if we take all the documents called 'Gospels' into account, there aren't 12 Gospels. There is only one. And it isn't a book,

---

<sup>1</sup> The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching. BCEW Para 15 p 7 1996

it is not written down – it is a Person, the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus the ‘Good News’, what the 4 documents we call Gospels are doing is exploring how one person, or a small group of people or a local community told the story of Jesus. They are different ways of expressing who Jesus is for them. So, the split between the Person of Jesus, his actions, his preaching, his healing, his confrontation with the Religious leaders, his profoundly deep relationship with the Father, his option for the poor, the excluded, the lepers, the sick, his willingness to learn from the Syrophoenician woman, his willingness to make apostles out of a woman with 5 husbands and so on, the split between this person and the way we live is... quite simply a scandal in our time.

How has this happened? Let me try something for a few moments. Let’s explore the difference between ‘Faith’ and ‘Religion’. Lots of us Christians and people of other ‘faiths’ have pinched the word and narrowed it down to describe the way we live – but actually it is the word that describes how anyone lives. It is perfectly possible to have a ‘faith’ and not be religious at all. It is perfectly possible for people to be very ‘spiritual’, to have a strong sense that they are led by something beyond them – and not be religious at all. I don’t know if you managed to see the programme ‘Pilgrimage’, the 8 folk walking to Rome, Les Dennis, Dana, Leslie Joseph, Brendan Cole, the Strictly dancer who describes himself as a confirmed atheist, Greg Rutherford, Olympic Long Jump champion, Mahreen, Stephen K Amos and Katie... At one point, Greg R and Brendan are in a tunnel, up to their knees in water. Brendan says this to Greg:

***‘This is me in my element.... It just feels really special, I just feel such energy, the water, the green, it’s just like ‘wow’....If you think about earth, and water and sun and plants and light, - it’s like everything we survive on. Without water there is no life, without sun there is no life without food there is no life it is all earth and plants and energy and I think there is something much more powerful that we haven’t discovered yet as humans, but every time I’ve come into this environment in any shape or form I feel lifted and inspired to do something. It’s good for the soul’*** They both high 5.

***Greg: ‘He is a pagan druid’ ...Brendan:’ So long as it doesn’t mean I have to believe in something I don’t believe in, a pagan druid, I’ll have that if it means the earth and I are one..’***

That’s a really good exploration of ‘faith’ and ‘spirituality’ come to that.

Religion is the ways and means that human beings have devised to show that they believe in gods, bring themselves in community with others who believe in the same gods or God, and explore what it means for them to live in such a way that people can survive and thrive. In other words, ‘Religion’ is man-made (if one is allowed to say that these days?). It is the word that describes the rites and the laws and the customs and the practices that folk have put together to express their ‘faith’ their ‘religious faith’...and a good bit of it can be changed.

It’s worth remembering this when you hear that your son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter no longer ‘go to mass’ on a Sunday, despite your best efforts to ‘bring them up to keep the faith’. They have kept the faith, they simply choose to express it in a

different way. We Catholics have done a fantastic job in bringing these two words and ideas together so that they mean the same thing. Lots of us Catholics secretly believe that the 'faith' is 'Roman Catholicism...' Indeed we used to preach that really strongly, we used to say: *Extra Ecclesia nulla salus* – Outside the Church there is no salvation – so if you're not a Catholic you can't be saved. Hence the development of the idea of 'Limbo' – a place for people who were good people but who died before the birth of Jesus and so they couldn't know him, would go – alongside babies who died before they were baptised. What a totally dreadful way of going on! Incidentally, Oscar Romero was born on 15 August 1918, and baptised in November 1919, 15 months after he was born – clearly no worries about not going to heaven if you died as an infant in El Salvador at the beginning of the last century.

Now I've introduced a fair number of issues in that last paragraph – and there could be more. The way most of us were brought up to 'go to Confession', with its strong emphasis on sin, remembering the list, doing penance and so on... has put so many people off coming anywhere near the experience of celebration of God's love and mercy towards us. Was the way we were brought up to 'go to Confession' Good News? Did it in any way help us deepen a guilt free love of Jesus and a deepening of our relationship with Jesus?

By and large, we Catholics are good at worship. I guess everyone of us here was brought up with the strict obligation to 'go to mass' every Sunday. A good deal of our 'religious' energy goes into making sure we 'go to mass' every Sunday – and incidentally, we're rather prone to have a go (silently, perhaps) at those who 'don't go', or have 'stopped going'. The language gives us away a bit. Mass was something we went to, we attended, we 'got' even. I suspect you'll have heard people who wanted to know where they could 'get' mass. I've always wondered what they did with it, once they'd got it... It was about being physically present for mass. There was so little formation for us about engaging, with what the Mass means. We had almost made the reception of the Eucharist a prize for those who were good, those who hadn't remarried after divorce (though so many people thought they couldn't share the Eucharist because they were divorced and never remarried...that was tragic). We were taught to say prayers, not so much to pray, we weren't really introduced to the Scriptures and never really learned how to read the accounts of the life of Jesus reflectively and contemplatively.

The Good News is that God loves us, is merciful towards us and invites us to live in such a way that everything we do reflects this in some way. Jesus came to point out, indicate, make real a way of life that is totally influenced by this understanding of God. Jesus is the body language of God – quite literally. So, when we gather together for worship, when we wonder what its about belonging to a parish, our gatherings and musings need to reflect this all inclusive (that's not just a sort of holiday, it is an aspiration for a worshipping community...) non-exclusive appreciation of what the Church and the world can be like.

It was quite funny at the gathering of clergy after the Chrism Mass in the Cathedral on Maundy Thursday. As it happened, I was sitting next to Fr Mark and Fr Chris Jackson and we were ushered out of the café next to the Cathedral to go and pick up our food at lunch time. When we got there, we were told that we couldn't have any, because the bishop had to come first. Now, I wonder, what bit of the kingdom of God is reflected in the statement

that the bishop has to eat first? We did manage to pick up our food – to be asked by the bishop if we'd jumped the queue! Isn't there a comment somewhere about prostitutes and sinners getting into the kingdom before the highly respected religious leaders of the time?

That is an interesting question. How does – well anything we decide, think, do, arrange, sort out – reflect the Good News who is the person of Jesus?

How does the way folk who have done jobs for years in a worshipping community and hold on to those jobs for dear life, reflect the Good News of Jesus?

Do our worshipping communities reflect the option for the poor taken by Jesus? How does our worship reflect the commitment of Jesus to bring the Good News to the poor? Jesus didn't wait for the poor (however we define those who are poor) to come to him.

How does our tradition of always needing 'permission' from the priest before people meet to pray, which happens in some areas, reflect the Good News of Jesus?

How are decisions made in our communities? How are the voices of those who feel unable to speak, actually heard?

How does our commitment to worship inspire us to become involved in the local social, political and cultural events and movements in our area? How do we reflect the Good News of Jesus in the local commercial and political arenas?

When we gather together for the celebration of Mass, we don't simply come to 'receive' the Body of Christ, we come to become the Body of Christ – to become the Good News of Jesus in our local world today.

This can be scary stuff. Anything which invites us to change is frightening. The tone of Laudato Si is both encouraging and extremely challenging. I wonder how you feel about the Extinction Rebellion protestors and their attempts to bring the massive issue of Climate Change to the forefront of the political agenda in this country and throughout the world. God help them in a country obsessed with us decoupling from Europe! How do you feel about young Greta Thunberg calling out our leaders for using 'beautiful words and making promises' while pretty well ignoring the impending disastrous implications of climate change and increasing ecological crisis. If it is true that you're interested here in St Joseph's in exploring the possibility of becoming a Live Simply parish, then there will be many opportunities to explore the implications of what is going on and what can be done about it. But one slight caution. At the end of it all, once there are solar panels on the roof of St Joseph's and everything that can be recycled is recycled, and there is no waste and folk are into planting trees and flowers and our worship reflects all of this, at the end of the day, if we're no more loving people, then we've missed the point. If we've developed the habit of looking down on those who don't recycle and don't knit their own sandals, don't live on desiccated lettuce leaves and wild honey. It's a great project, and I wish you well with it.

Why say all this. Well, you did ask for some reflection following those two excellent evenings. I think the very fact that you asked for some further reflection is a good thing. One of the things I've always worried about when offering reflections to any groups is

whether or not it makes the slightest difference to those present. If it doesn't, then all I've done is offer poor entertainment. Another thing I often wonder about is whether whatever is being said actually fits into anything else, is it part of a programme or simply a 'one off'. Now I do know that whatever happens in any kind of context like this is actually up to the Holy Spirit, its not up to me to try and tell the Spirit how to act. But I do have a sense that with you here there are some genuine questions being asked with a genuine expectation that something might come of it.

Meetings, by and large, have a bad name. Usually because they're not planned properly, or because folk don't actually know how to conduct themselves at a meeting, or no homework has been done. There are all sorts of reasons, and we can actually learn how to manage meetings rather than presume to know what we're doing. But also lets never forget that Pentecost happened at a meeting. Let's hope the same Spirit is alive and active at your AGM tonight.

A brief PS. The reason I raised all those points earlier about baptism, limbo, divorce, becoming the Body of Christ, the difference between saying prayer and praying and so on – was simply to indicate that maybe there are great swathes of things we all need to re-visit. Maybe part of any parish AGM is to at least wonder about our Formation as Catholic Christians in the world we live in. With that thought I leave you – no pressure there....

Jim O'K 23 April 2019