



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Preaching the truth

Readings: Ezekiel 33: 7-9, s 94, Romans 13: 8-10, Matthew 18: 15-20

I am in a foreign land. It is Sunday. My pilgrimage group are not arriving until tonight when I will offer Mass at 8 pm before we serve them supper at the apartment.

As a treat I have decided to go to Mass in the morning where another priest would celebrate and preach and I could just enjoy the luxury. As a priest you very rarely get to hear each other preach so it's a good opportunity to see how another man, having prayed the Scriptures, helps his people to understand, internalise and put into practice the Word of God.

Today's texts are varied, vital and coherent. The prophet Ezekiel reminds us of the enormous responsibility we carry in knowing the Word of God and our duty to share it. Jesus incarnates that in the practical measures he gives us in addressing concerns with friends, neighbours and, eventually, community. St. Paul puts all this in the context of reminding ourselves of the two great dominical commandments – to love God and your neighbour.

I will come back to these texts in a moment.

A young man in plain clothes came and welcomed me to a very thin congregation. I assumed, correctly, that he was the priest who, having spotted me in my clericals, had come over as an act of professional defusing. He was pleasant, kind and warm. The problems began when he started to preach. I am loathe to criticise a fellow priest but his particular take was educational in as much as it contained many of the problems inherent in some modern preaching.

He began by explaining that the passages, especially Ezekiel (but to some extent the Gospel too) were 'very difficult to interpret for our age'. This is priestly code for 'unfortunately the Word of God does not say the things that my 21st century liberal mindset would like it to.' He repeated the 'difficulty' mantra at regular intervals like a drumbeat throughout an increasingly agonised homily.

Briefly..... Ezekiel was very 'harsh' in correcting people in this way. The idea of sin and punishment was clearly dated. We could perhaps excuse Ezekiel because he thought he was a prophet and that God had, in some sense, given him a message. As he was several centuries before Christ this would also account for his unreformed attitude to sin and judgement.

The Gospel itself, albeit in a much less abrasive way, brought up the issue of judgement and addressing fault individually and in the wider context of community or church as we call it. These days, of course, we were much more likely to see these perceived differences as 'matters for negotiation' and, if unresolved, issues for local community discernment.

Mercifully all this could be put to bed by a good dose of St. Paul who must have been surprised as I was to find himself cast in the role liberal saviour of the day. So long as we applied the 'love' button all the other problems would resolve.

The problems, no doubt very obvious to my patient readers, are several but they include the following:

There is an assumption in much 'critical' preaching – the style that has consumed and destroyed the theology departments of well before my lifetime - that, rather than providing a key to the history of salvation, many foundational texts will be evidence of a wider incoherence in the Word of God. I remember noticing this many years ago when an author set out to resolve the apparent difficulties of the Holy Week time frame. Rather than congratulate him on a masterly work the princes of academe snorted derision at anyone who could dare to thus attack their deconstructionist castles and confirm Gospel accuracy.

A Christian preacher starts from a different place. First of all he assumes coherence in the Word of God. The Word, after all, is incarnated in Jesus and Jesus speaks through Holy Scripture. He is the Eternal Word not a reforming rabbi.

The Christian preacher assumes not that Ezekiel 'thinks he is a prophet and he thinks he has been given the Word of God' but rather that that is what he is and that is what he has indeed got. This is not a matter for my little limited human individual discernment. It is what the Church teaches, better minds than mine have understood and holier souls than mine have been fed

by. It is why he is in the Canon of Scripture as a prophet of the same Eternal Word.

Many years ago in a school biology class we were invited to examine a dead frog pinned to a dissecting board to see how it worked. Too many of the modern preachers think that is what they must do to the Word of God. I need hardly tell you that they have got it the wrong way round. The Word of God is the living One and the All-powerful and He will examine us.

Second: There is, in the modern preacher, a cultural and constitutional fear of saying something is wrong. People in the congregation/society might be offended, might think (boo word of boo word) that you were being 'judgemental'. I once heard a clergyman say that he couldn't say things were wrong in case someone in his congregation was doing it. This, no doubt, led to very short sermons and the democratisation of sin – if enough people do it you can't call it sin.

The problem is that my young preacher has missed the point on two counts. Perhaps if he had children he would have got it. It is a duty not an option to oppose wrong and to correct it. To fail in this task is not kind but utterly careless. If I fail to stop my child running towards a cliff edge or putting his hand in the fire – what kind of father am I? My intervention, like Ezekiel's, is one of passionate care. I do not want my child or my society to suffer harm. Also there is the assumption, in the charge of judgementalism, that I am pontificating off my own bat. I am not. The descent from the cliff edge would still be lethal to the lemming child, the fire still scarily hot were I to speak or not. If there is time, I instruct gently. If it is urgent I must shout and act.

The fear of the young priest is that he will be seen to make judgements. But he must understand that he will be passing on the same judgement under which he and I both stand, the judgement of God. And he must do so because he loves his people and wants the best for them. Anything less is hireling shepherding. Neither he nor I are here to pass on our own wisdom. That would be a brief and hideously embarrassing task. We are here for the Divine Wisdom which alone can redeem Man.

Third. The young preacher talks of 'negotiation' and 'local solutions' which sounds fine but it is not what Jesus says. Negotiation implies inevitable compromise and compromise on the truth is the short road to relativism – the post-modern rat that gnaws at the bonds of love and truth and beauty. Nor can there be 'local solutions' according to congregational preference. I have seen that in church life and it is far more divisive than dealing with it upfront could ever be. Besides the Church is the Church – congregational solutions are for schismatics and heretics.

In short the coherence of God's Word can easily be made clear.

Ezekiel, great suffering prophet of the Exile, longs for his people's restoration. He is 'tasked' with preparing them. As the 'watchman' of Israel he has a duty of love to his people. Silence is as bad as lying if it leads to the death of a sinner or the destruction of a community. The 'Word Bearers' (and that includes you and me) must speak out.

In the Gospel Jesus commends and commands a pastoral process. Speak one to one gently, firmly, lovingly, privately. Don't make the man look a fool. Give him the ladder to climb down graciously. If that fails then discreetly involve a couple of others from the Faith so he understands that

this is not just a bee in your bonnet and you are acting in accord with God's (Levitical) law. Only if both those fail does the public judgement of the Church kick in.

St. Paul who, let us remember, spent a considerable amount of time and energy and epistolary effort correcting the moral meanderings and doctrinal deviations of his converts ties this all together by recalling Christ's Golden Rule – Love God – Love your neighbour. In other words all this takes place within the context of God's love for His fallen creatures and against the background of what Canon Law calls 'The Supreme Law of the Church – that is The Salvation of Souls.'

POSTSCRIPTUM:

You will be asking did I speak to the young man after the service?

The answer is 'Yes'. I was as gentle as I could be and he was as gracious as he could be – more gracious than I suspect I would have been at his age.

What he will do with my unsolicited correction is his call but it would have been dishonest of me to have said nothing, especially to a young pastor who so clearly wants to serve Jesus. My prayer is for his growing confidence in God's Word. Pray for all your priests for courage and confidence and love.

©2017 Fowey Retreat