

## Homily for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2017

One day, after I gave a homily at the seminary while I was a deacon in training, a professor whom I very much respected pulled me aside to criticize it; he said I was too convincing. He went on that there was a risk that people would believe me because of the way I said things, not because the things I said were true. I took that to heart. When I'm in the pulpit, as I am now, I don't want to persuade you of anything: I want the truth of the Gospel to come through, not anything about "me" or my personality or my opinions. Saint Paul says the same thing in his way when he writes to the church at Corinth, as we just heard:

"...so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God."

And that raises a question for us in the church today. Do you think, maybe, that so many people stop being active Catholics because their faith when they were active didn't rest on the "power of God," but on something else? I occasionally hear people say they stopped going to Mass when a favorite priest was transferred away, or when the music at Mass changed in a way they didn't like, or when the preaching got dull. Contrast this with a brief story: The actor Sir Alec Guinness – Obi Wan Kenobi to Star Wars fans – was once asked, on returning from church on Sunday, "How was Mass?" His reply was, "Oh, the usual: Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, whole and entire under the form of bread and wine." In other words, he paid attention to what mattered; not to the superficial things that people usually note about a Mass. Good music, good preaching, good environment have their place; but they're not the central thing. Jesus Christ risen from the dead is the center, or else everything we do here is a show and a lie, no matter how attractive the theatrics are. But we can only see this, as Saint Paul says, by "the power of God."

I look around and I suspect that the church hasn't done a particularly good job of focusing people's attention on the power of God. Certainly the changes in the Mass – after the Second Vatican Council, and more recently when the translations of the prayers were changed – have drawn people's focus; that's understandable. Some priests seem to think it's helpful to put on a show, and some people seem to like that; but Mass isn't supposed to be about the priest. We're supposed to disappear. And Mass isn't supposed to be entertaining. We need to allow God to work – we need to focus our attention on God's presence in the Scriptures that give us direction for how to live, and our attention on the Real Presence of Christ in the action of the Mass, so that we understand that the Risen Christ is present among us, to give us strength to live the way Christ invites. Take today's readings for an example: Isaiah says,

"Share your bread with the hungry  
Shelter the oppressed and the homeless  
Clothe the naked when you see them  
And do not turn your back on your own.

We shouldn't pretend that that's an easy way to live, when so many people in our world and in our own neighborhood are hungry; when so many are homeless and oppressed, here and around the world (sixty million men, women, and children around the world are as I speak refugees, forced from their homes and the world they knew). Living the way the Scriptures

direct us – sharing what we have, welcoming the stranger – that takes noticing our fear, and it takes drawing on the strength Christ gives us by His presence in this sacrament in order to resist that fear.

And Christ warns us that living His way will make us unpopular or worse: Remember last week's Gospel when we heard, "Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me"? If we fit in easily with the people around us, if we share their opinions and their outlook, and if we don't stand out because we take the Scriptures seriously to a dangerous degree, we may have to worry that what today's Gospel describes is going on: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its taste..."

Pope Francis had some things to say about this last weekend: This is from the British magazine the *Catholic Herald*:

*Answering questions from young people in the group [of pilgrims] this morning, the pope said, "the sickness or, you can say the sin, that Jesus condemns most is hypocrisy," which is precisely what is happening when someone claims to be a Christian but does not live according to the teaching of Christ.*

*"You cannot be a Christian without living like a Christian," he said. "You cannot be a Christian without practicing the Beatitudes. You cannot be a Christian without doing what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 25." This is a reference to Christ's injunction to help the needy by such works of mercy as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and welcoming the stranger.*

*"It's hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, toss out someone who is in need of my help," he said. "If I say I am Christian, but do these things, I'm a hypocrite."*

Strong words. But I don't think the Holy Father wants you to be convinced of this because he said it. And I don't want to convince you either. The only person who should convince any of us of Isaiah's words, or of Jesus', is Jesus Christ himself. And neither the Holy Father nor I can make that happen – only the Holy Spirit can. Our job – yours and mine – is to make room for the Holy Spirit to convince us of the truth of Jesus' message, so that we find the desire and the courage to live according to it. We make room, primarily, by coming here to be in God's special presence and by paying attention while we're here – putting aside other things, especially our fears, to let God's word, and God's power, sink in to us and change us. Letting our light shine isn't a matter of lighting it ourselves – God does that, if we give God the chance. Our job is to remove the bushel basket that gets in the light's way. Let's be quiet and think about that for a moment.