

Homily for Ordinary Time XXIII, 2018

September 9, 2018

Regaining Credibility

I was serving Holy Communion at a Funeral Mass earlier this week. There were lots of young women and men coming up to receive. They were very well-dressed and respectful, but from their bearing I had the sense that they probably weren't regular Mass-goers; but that's common. I always try to look people in the eye when I serve Holy Communion, and I couldn't help wondering, given what's been in the news about priests and bishops recently, what these young people saw when they looked back. They probably don't know any priests personally – I'm confident none of them knew me; their image of priests would come from the news. So what did they think of "priests"? I imagine I wasn't Father O'Malley from *Going My Way* in their eyes.

That was no fun for me, but that's not my point. What most concerns me is, what have we lost from these ongoing scandals, and how do we recover? It used to be that religious traditions, ours and others', had enough credibility to at least be listened to about the moral life, even among people who didn't go to church much. Now, I suspect that even among churchgoers there's a huge question mark over anything a church leader says about a moral issue: Does he practice what he preaches? And what right does any church – the Catholic Church especially – have to tell me what to do, when its own house is clearly in such disorder?

The corruption in our church is a story that isn't going to fade fast, especially with the just-announced statewide investigation by the NY State Attorney General. So beyond the tragedy of the loss of the church's public voice, how to keep going as a believer will be a question for more and more people. I got some good feedback on the column I wrote in an August bulletin about just that question, from both inside and outside the parish. So I'm going to use today's readings to see what they might tell us about how to hang on; that has to happen before we can even think about having any useful influence on society. Let's take the readings in order.

Isaiah, first: The setting is social and political disaster and conquest of the north of Israel by Assyria; and the prophet's job is to keep hope alive in the south despite Assyria's continuing threat. He says, in imagery that would be familiar to a desert-dwelling people reliant on water to keep their crops and herds alive, that God is more powerful even than this world-conquering power. For us, the message is that it may take pure faith and raw hope to trust that, despite appearances, church leadership can change its way of doing business and redeem itself.

Isaiah's message is not to give up hope in a difficult time – we would say, hope that the Holy Spirit is still with the church, and that virtue and courage among church leaders might just spring up somewhere to give new life.

Then, James. James talks to his people like a drill-sergeant to new recruits – you can almost hear him shouting behind the text. "Show no partiality!" "Have you not set yourselves up as judges with evil designs?!" I find this, especially in today's church, refreshing – or at least bracing. It's not always comfortable, but it is ultimately ennobling to be spoken to like an adult rather than being patronized, or swathed in pious and gauzy words that, on examination, have no substance. James's lesson is that we need to hear more forthright language from our

bishops – calling things by their right names and treating lay people like adults, capable of complex thought and of frank discussion – and able to make the sorts of tough calls that you know you have to make in your families and probably at your jobs. James invites us to cut through platitudes and speak plainly; to see what’s in front of us and frame it within the values of Jesus; and to expect and to demand those same things from our leaders.

Finally, what can we learn from Jesus himself in the Gospel? When Jesus gives hearing and speech back to the man in today’s story Saint Mark is making a point about Jesus’ actions being the fulfillment of God’s plan. For us, the particulars of what Jesus does might be the better lesson. We live in a culture in which true speech is being corrupted every day, in the church and in politics, in the media and maybe by infection even in ourselves. The Bible tells us that words are precious to God – they’re the way God creates: “God said, ‘Let there be...’ – and so it happened!” Words are what Jesus uses to instruct and to cure: “Ephthatha – be opened!” Jesus himself is God’s Word: “In the beginning was the Word...” And words are what Jesus warns us against corrupting: “Say yes when you mean yes, and no when you mean no: Anything else comes from the evil one.” We live in the midst of lies, clichés, coverups, misdirections, and pious mumblings of platitudes. The way of Jesus resists that and speaks plainly. We need to do that, and to expect and demand that church leaders do the same.

So how do we survive this mess? Plain speaking, facing uncomfortable topics straight on, and living in hope despite everything. And mostly, as we turn now to the Lord’s Sacrament, we survive by remembering that we have not been left abandoned to ourselves: Christ is with us, and will help us to rebuild.

I don’t particularly care what those people coming to Holy Communion at the funeral thought about me – although I’d like it to be more positive than it probably was. But at the heart, I hope they knew – even if only in some obscure way – that in the Holy Sacrament they were receiving they were meeting Christ, who loves them and who will guide them despite the failings of His church.