

Homily for the 20th Sunday of the Year, Year C, 18th August 2019

The Mass is beautiful.

There is a dramatic painting above the altar in the English College in Rome where I studied for six years in preparation for the priesthood. It was painted in 1580, the year after the first of 44 priests from the College was martyred in England. It shows the prone form of the dead, crucified Jesus being held up from behind by God the Father whilst the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, hovers above them. From the pierced side of Christ gushes bright red blood and this flows in a stream on to a globe depicting the then known world which is held up to our view by an angel. We can see that Jesus' blood falls upon England and as it strikes our nation bright orange sparks fly up into the air.

It's a powerful portrayal of God's mercy. The message conveyed by the painter is clear. Jesus' love for the English people is unconditional. He died for them. His love is a fire which consumes him on the cross. He shares the pain of the Catholic community which at that moment was being persecuted. Through his divine power he will continue to extend his mercy to all those who are willing to receive it. And the principal way that he will do this is through the ministry of the priests whom he will send in his name on a mission to his beloved England.

This picture would have been familiar to all of the martyrs of the College. Its message expressed the core of their priestly spirituality. Many were understandably deeply alarmed at the prospect of returning to England. The form of execution meted out to priests – hanging, drawing and quartering - was designed to be especially humiliating and especially painful. Hence, after a while the Rector of the College had to insist that all seminarians should take the missionary oath. This stated that as soon as possible after ordination they would return to England to begin their mission.

What did these men bring with them on their return to their homeland? Simply this: the ability to preach and to offer spiritual counsel and the power to celebrate the sacraments. It is precisely through these means that, in those dark days, Jesus continued to bring fire to the earth, the fire of his love, which he mentioned in our gospel today. Word went round through all sorts of secret communication networks that a priest was available in a particular house for Confession and that Mass would

be celebrated at a particular time and Catholics gathered to encounter their risen Lord. And often, after a while, somebody would betray the priest for a reward and then he who had offered the sacrifice of the Mass would have the ultimate privilege of sacrificing his life for Christ. When this happened, the priest's contribution to the mission reached its high point for nothing is more fruitful for the life of the Church than martyrdom.

This history was brought back to me yesterday when a priest of this diocese celebrated a wedding at St Winefride's Church. Fr Christopher Willis, a priest of our diocese, was until recently the Spiritual Director of the English College in Rome. His predecessor was John Gerard, a Jesuit priest who was tortured and incarcerated in the Tower of London before escaping commando-style on a rope from his cell window across the moat. We have an extraordinary history!

God who was merciful to English Catholics then continues to be merciful to us now. In our time we are menaced not by persecution but by religious indifference. It has had a massive impact. One indication of how prevalent it has become is the immediate falling away from the practice of the faith of almost all the families in our parish whose children made their First Holy Communion in June. 95 per cent ceased to attend Mass the week afterwards. It's a breath-taking haemorrhaging from our community. And some, as the feedback forms indicate, are angry that they were obliged to attend Sunday Mass in preparation for their child's First Holy Communion. The drama of our first reading, in which the people turned on Jeremiah for urging them to be faithful to the Lord, is being played out in our own time.

How can we as a parish respond to this mass rejection of our faith by those who are connected to us by baptism? There is only one response for a Christian: love. It is in bearing this rejection as patiently as we can that we, in our time, share in the suffering of Christ. We have to accept that those things which are so beautiful to us – the Holy Mass, the Sacrament of Confession – are unremarkable to almost all the parents of the children who send their children to our schools. They have bought into a modern culture which sees the Church as essentially irrelevant. It is highly unlikely that their children will in future years wish to participate in the Church. A recent authoritative sociological survey suggests that we have now reached a tipping point: the children of lapsed parents whose parents are also lapsed simply cease to identify with the Church.

Nevertheless we are called to express our love for these parents by demonstrating our respect for their de facto rejection of our faith. It's hard. It's the cross

But that's not all we do! In the face of present difficulties we recognise that the Lord is calling us to commit ourselves at a deeper level to discipleship. We still have a priest, we can still have the Mass. Can we lack anything if we can regularly encounter Jesus and experience his transforming love? Is this not in itself a cause why we can be joyful, why we must be joyful?

And then also we continue the gentle process of evangelising and catechising all those who express an interest in our beautiful Catholic faith. In particular we can focus upon those parents who wish to have their children baptised. There is a lovely moment each time a baptism is celebrated when I light a long taper from the paschal candle and then use it to light the baptismal candle of the baby which is being held by a parent or a godparent. The moment always captures the attention of the congregation. It's because it depicts the coming to bear of Jesus' love on the life of the child. The Paschal Candle represents Our Lord. The child, through Baptism, is receiving the benefits of his cruel death and glorious resurrection: namely freedom from original sin and eternal life. "I came to bring fire to the earth" said Jesus. And at that moment his words are proved true! Once a parent begins to understand how amazing this event is, that they and their child are at this moment being enveloped in the unconditional love of God, then they can begin, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and supported by all of us, to appreciate just how marvellous it is to be an active member of God's family.