

Friday (Oscar Romero)

A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that? Very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone, that's the way many would like preaching to be. But preaching which avoids thorny matters, avoids conflicts and difficulties, does not light up the world it is preached in. The gospel is courageous, it's the good news of him who came to take away the world's sins.

Scripture (2Timothy 4:1-5)

Before God and before Christ Jesus I charge you, in the name of his appearing and of his kingdom: proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, give encouragement—but do all with patience and the desire to instruct. The time is sure to come when people will not accept sound teaching and they will collect themselves a whole series of teachers according to their tastes; and then they will shut their ears to the truth. But you must keep steady all the time; put up with suffering; do the work of preaching the gospel; fulfil the service asked of you.

If you would like a copy of the notes from a discussion about these readings, considering the following questions, please go to www.sthelenscrosby.org.uk Click on 'Prayer', then 'Thinking outside the pew', Or email me

Q1 Is your faith strong enough to argue with God?

Q2 Does God make things difficult to test our faith?

Q3 Is doubt a sign of faith?

Q4 As members of the Church, do we get out of the boat?

19th week of Ordinary time

Is my faith strong enough to lead me into doubt?

When Elijah meets God on the mountain, (1 Kings 19:9-13) he is not in good shape. He had incurred the wrath of Jezebel, who now wanted him dead. He had fled to the desert where he lay down and wanted to die – a clear message to God that he had had enough and was resigning as prophet! Instead of comforting him, God provides him with food to strengthen him for the journey across the desert to Mt. Horeb – the place where God had appeared to Moses and established the covenant when he gave the Ten Commandments. Elijah has come back to the starting point but complains to God that it's all over and that he has failed, since the Israelites have abandoned the covenant and, apart from him, the prophets have all been killed. If you read Kings 18 & 19, it is clear that Elijah is furious with God, and implies that God hasn't acted the way he was supposed to.

It is interesting that when God wants Elijah to stand before him on the mountain, he is not in the destructive hurricane, earthquake and fire, (as he had been when the Israelites were gathered at the foot of the mountain; instead he is much more intimately present in the gentle breeze, or 'sound of silence'. This might seem reassuring for Elijah, but this intimacy allows God to say he won't accept Elijah's resignation and that the Covenant still stands. He sends Elijah back from the mountain, back into the difficulties he had fled from, to continue to be his prophet. He assures Elijah that his complaints are unfounded, but Elijah will only know this to be true when he goes back.

The apostles, too, are facing difficulties as they row alone, (Mt. 14:22-33), the strong winds symbolising the hostility they will face. Jesus, meanwhile, has retreated to pray in the hills: like Elijah and Moses, he needs to be alone with God. Coming to them across the water would, for the apostles and the early Christians, call to mind the Old Testament where God has mastery over the seas, and so point to the divine nature of Jesus.

Peter's response is a remarkable act of faith. Instead of asking Jesus to come to them and make everything alright, he wants to go out to meet Jesus. Often, we think of how Peter 'gets it wrong', but this isn't the point of the incident. Peter would not have experienced doubt if he hadn't stepped out of the boat, leaving behind his security and certainties and stepped into the difficulties.

He asks to be saved, and Jesus obliges. But why? He doesn't then say, 'O.K., let's go back to where everything was going so well.' Instead, he gets into the boat and they carry on. As he gets into the boat, the wind drops: the apostles bow down showing they have experienced God with them in the boat.

A common symbol for the early church was a small boat in a storm-tossed sea. Like the apostles, the small group of followers were surrounded by hostile and powerful forces. Like the apostles, they must have felt that Jesus had left them, as they saw friends and family dying and being imprisoned in the persecution. They would have learned from Peter, and from Elijah, that faith in God does not protect you from difficulties; it sends you into them so as to bring the Good News.

We are given the same mission today as the early Church. Perhaps we need to look at our prayers: are we essentially asking God to make everything smooth, or are we stepping out of the boat? God was using the apostles to fulfil his plans. He is intimately present in the Eucharist and as the Holy Spirit, not so that we can be saved or protected; it is so that we can go 'in peace' into the wind, to love and serve him. Martin Bennett

Monday (Meister Eckhart)

God, who is faithful, allows his friends to fall frequently into weakness only in order to remove from them any prop on which they might lean. For a loving person, it would be a great joy to be able to achieve many great feats; this joy would be a source of hope so that their works become a prop and a support on which they can lean. Our Lord wishes his friends to be freed from such an attitude, and so he removes their support from them so they must henceforth find their support only in him. The more essentially and simply the mind rests on God and is sustained by him, the more deeply we are established in God and the more receptive we are to him in all his precious gifts—for human kind should build on God alone.

Scripture (Matthew 14:22,24-31)

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he went by himself to pray. The boat, when it was some furlongs from land, was hard pressed by rough waves, for there was a strong head wind. In the fourth watch of the night Jesus came towards them, walking on the sea, and when the disciples saw him they were terrified. But at once, Jesus called out to them, saying, 'Courage! It's me! Don't be afraid.' Peter answered, saying, 'Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water.' Jesus said, 'Come.' Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus, but then noticing the wind, he took fright and began to sink. 'Lord,' he cried, 'save me!' Jesus put his hand out at once and held him. 'You have so little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?' And as they got into the boat, the wind dropped.

Tuesday (Cardinal Newman)

If, then, faith be the essence of a Christian life, it follows that our duty lies in risking upon Christ's word what we have, for what we have not, and doing so in a noble and generous way, not indeed rashly or lightly, still without knowing accurately what we are doing; uncertain about our reward, and about our extent of sacrifice, in all respects leaning, waiting on him, trusting in him to enable us to fulfil our own vows, and so in all respects proceeding without carefulness or anxiety about the future.

Scripture (1Thessalonians 2:1-2,4-6)

You know yourselves, my brothers and sisters, that our visit to you has not been pointless. Although, as you know, we had received rough treatment and insults, God gave us the courage to speak his gospel to you fearlessly, in spite of great opposition. God has approved us to be entrusted with the gospel, and this is how we preach, seeking not to please human beings but God who tests our hearts. Indeed, we have never thought of acting with the thought of flattering anyone nor as an excuse for greed, God is our witness; nor have we looked for honour from any human beings

Wednesday (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh)

Every encounter is an encounter with God and in his sight. We are sent to everyone we meet on our way, either to give or to receive, sometimes without knowing it. Sometimes we experience the wonder of giving what we did not possess, sometimes we have to pay with our own blood for what we give. We should be completely open and like putty in God's hands. The things that happen in our life, accepted as God's gifts, will give us the opportunity to be continually creative, doing the work of a Christian.

Scripture (Jeremiah 4:1-10)

The word of Yahweh came to me, saying: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; I appointed you as prophet to the nations.' I then said, 'Ah, ah, ah, Lord, Yahweh; you see, I do not know how to speak: I am only a child!' But Yahweh replied, 'Do not say, "I am only a child," for you must go to all to whom I send you and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of confronting them, for I am with you.' Then Yahweh stretched out his hand and touched my mouth, and said to me: 'There! I have put my words into your mouth.'

Thursday (2nd Vatican Council— 'Priests')

The Lord Jesus has made his whole Mystical Body share in the anointing by the Spirit with which he himself has been anointed. For in him all the faithful are made a holy and royal priesthood. They proclaim the perfections of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light. Hence, there is no member who does not have a part in the mission of the whole Body. Rather, each one ought to hallow Jesus in their heart and bear witness to Jesus in the Spirit of prophecy.

Scripture (John 15: 5,8-10)

I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing. It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit and be my disciples. I have loved you just as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.