

Sunday 24/25th July 2021

St Mary's Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

Introduction

Welcome again, everybody. Dennis O'Driscoll was a poet from Tipperary who died in 2012. He can be penetrating and entertaining, as in his poem Missing God, which references our Gospel today. The poem starts like this:

His grace is no longer called for
Before meals: farmed fish multiply
without His intercession.
Bread production rises through
disease-resistant grains devised
scientifically to mitigate His faults.

Yet, though we rebelled against Him
like adolescents, uplifted to see
an oppressive father banished -
a bearded hermit - to the desert,
we confess to missing Him at times.

We hear the poem today in a triple context: the ongoing challenge to belief in God, the experience of the pandemic and our gradual return to in-person worship at Mass. Like the poem, our recent experience invites us to reflect on what we have been missing and, as believers, what do we hope for on our return.

Topic

To help us make sense of all this, we start reading today from John chapter 6, where a series of stories all centre around the metaphor of bread and the person of Jesus.

Steps

The readings for the next few Sunday provide a marvellous opportunity to reflect together on both the Eucharist and on our faith in Christ. The Gospel of John was written at the end of the first century, so quite late, and after many decades of Christian community, including the experience of the Eucharist. Our chapter 6 is often given the heading of the "Bread of Life." The gospel writer has identified a need, even a crisis. In my opinion, the tension underlying John 6 is this: there are people attending the Eucharist, sharing the bread and wine, without a fully developed faith in Christ. This explains why every story in this chapter focuses on the person of Jesus. This is very clear next Sunday: this is the work of God, to believe in the one whom he has sent.

For this deeper, more central reflection, it may be that we have been helped by the experience of the lockdowns. That difficult experience was also for many a kind of rediscovery of important dimensions of our lives. For example, our basic need of touch, the need to hold and be held by someone we love. Perhaps also our lives were less

driven, with a better balance, with more time for reflection. Much of our lives are spent at work, career, getting and spending, as TS Eliot put it. It may even be that in the light of the last year and a half, we have been able to recognise the deeper hunger within for something more. When he was barely able to shave, Bob Geldoff wrote his autobiography, a slender volume, called "Is that it?" We've all been asking that question as we have faced threat, fragility and morality: is that it?

Faith in God is the recognition that there is indeed "more". Faith in Christ is the affirmation that there is a very great deal more. According to the Gospel of John, Christ offered us all life, and love, in abundance. The Good Shepherd says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Earlier in the Gospel, we hear the thrilling words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16)

But each of us does need to ask, what do I believe about God? Who is Jesus for me? How am I nourished by my faith? What do I do to sustain my discipleship and to grow as a believer? For what do I hunger and thirst? And so on. As we return to the table of the Lord, now is the time to ask two questions: why am I doing this and what do I believe about Jesus? The second question comes first, of course, as the Gospel of John makes clear.

Conclusion

Missing God in the poem by O'Driscoll is ambiguous. Missing could be simply feeling the absence but it could also mean missing the mark, not aiming right. Further on in the poem, O'Driscoll has a startling image of life without God:

Miss Him when the TV scientist
explains the cosmos through equations,
leaving our planet to revolve on its axis
aimlessly, a wheel skidding in snow.

Indeed!