

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

29 August 2021

Welcome

The Gospel just read makes for uncomfortable listening, especially the line, “the doctrines they teach are nothing but human commandments.” (Mark 7:7) In a tradition as rich and as broad as the Catholic Church, there are bound to some “only human regulations.” A clear example would be the traditional teaching about limbo, where the unbaptised supposedly went, and which caused so much pain and distress, especially to mothers.

Topic

As we enter into uncharted waters, it is possible that we can learn from the the struggles of the first generations of believers.

Steps

Mark’s Gospel was written, probably in Syria, during the horrible conflict of the Jewish War, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. There were internal conflicts as well. Originally, all disciples were Jews. But from earliest times, non-Jews, Gentiles, had entered the Christian movement. This triggered a crisis: how much of the Jewish tradition should non-Jews be obliged to follow? Specifically, should the men be circumcised and should they all, men and women, follow the dietary laws, the kosher rules? It was an issue for Paul, much earlier. It would be an issue for the Acts of the Apostles, written much, much later. It was an issue when Mark was writing.

In those intense conversations, no one ever quoted the practice and teaching of Jesus. There was a good reason for this: the historical Jesus met almost no Gentiles and the issue of the food laws or circumcision simply didn’t arise in his day. So the early church had to make a decision. As we see in today’s first reading, the “Law” was regarded as God-given and not to be lightly set aside. Luckily for us, early Christians decided not to insist on the dietary law or on circumcision. In the light of God’s salvation in Jesus, the felt free to make up their own minds about something *deeply* traditional.

In a new situation, they felt free to do something new. Well, not quite *totally* new. They knew Jesus had broken the Sabbath, for the sake of healing. They also knew he had broken the purity laws by touching sinners and eating with them, for the sake of compassion. Still, there was no indication from Jesus about circumcision and about the food laws. So, they were obliged to make up their own minds. In this case, they felt free to set aside not just human regulations but even received divine law.

Today, as a faith community, we find ourselves in a parallel situation. A way of being church is decaying before our very eyes. Decaying is a gentle euphemism: crashing might be more accurate. In the diocese, we have the Task Force, “Building Hope”, under the leadership of Ciarán O’Carroll. There is also to be a National Synod in two years time, under the leadership of Kieran McDermott. As we look again the core elements of

Christian faith and imagine how community could be into the future, two questions stand out for me.

The first is this: how much of what we have inherited is merely human regulations? In other words, what elements of the past, good and inspiring perhaps in their day, do we now need to let go of? Are there habits, rules and regulations, which stand in the way of proclaiming the Gospel today? An obvious one would be the unlamented Limbo. Another very traditional stance was that celibacy, specifically virginity, is superior to marriage. A more recent phenomenon is the outsourcing of the handing on of the faith to schools – is that working? Is it sustainable? And so forth.

My second question is this: Are there situations today, for which we have no teaching from Jesus, but about which we must make decisions today? The early Christians had no teaching from Jesus about two key issues: circumcision and the food laws. They innovated and they set aside the past – vital, if the emerging Christian church were to be more than another sect of Judaism. I have two examples. Many people today simply do not “get” the traditional church teaching on LGBTQ+ issues. To condemn someone for the involuntary fact of orientation seems incomprehensible. Of course, there is a tradition, a strong one, but actually no teaching from Jesus on such matters. Similarly, there is a consistent and ancient tradition about who may be ordained. But again, there is no teaching directly from Jesus himself.

Peroratio

As I said at the start, the Gospel is uncomfortable – but at least it makes us ask open questions. Perhaps we can learn from the courage of the earliest Christians. Perhaps today we should reflect not only on letting go of traditions that are merely human regulations but also embracing the challenge of today by innovating, as they did.