

Donnybrook

17 October 2021

Welcome

Welcome again, everybody. The teaching in today's Gospel is super-clear – so much so that any commentary would risk taking from it. It is also a teaching which is always up-to-date and relevant, because the temptation to power and the abuse of power is always "there," as we now know so clearly.

Topic

Rather than simply regret the past, the question is, what to do today?

Steps

Today the Christian project in our society is at risk, from at least three things. The first thing is unfamiliarity (which might seem strange); the second is lack of understanding (adult faith formation); and the third is the credibility of Christian claims.

To address this complex of issues, what is needed is nothing less than a reformation. The word reformation can be unsettling for Catholics, but the term was used regularly by the council of Trent, enacting practical changes in response to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

As it happens, there is something afoot in the church which just might lead to the needed reformation. Today in the Pro-Cathedral, our new Archbishop led a prayer service inaugurating what is called the synodal pathway. This is an initiative of Pope Francis and his advisers. The goal is nothing less than a consultation of all the Catholics in the world, nominally about 1.2 billion people about where to go from here. If it bears fruit, it will be more significant than Vatican II.

Pope Francis urged Catholics not to "remain barricaded in our certainties" but to "listen to one another." "Are we prepared for the adventure of this journey? Or are we fearful of the unknown, preferring to take refuge in the usual excuses: 'It's useless' or 'We've always done it this way'?" he asked. In particular, he wants us to listen to the voices on what he calls the periphery – those on the edge or alienated from church – he mentions in particular women.

There will be three phases in this consultation process, called "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission."

- The first is the "listening phase": people in parishes and dioceses will be able to discuss a wide range of issues.
- The second is the "continental phase" will see church leaders will gather to discuss and formalise their findings
- The third "universal phase" will see a month-long gathering of the bishops Rome in October 2023.

The project is huge and full of potential and risk and has already frightened the horses in the more conservative stables.

My own hope is that we can discover again the Gospel, the good news. By this, I mean two things. The first is to recover the teaching of Jesus, his alternative worldview. It will certainly include rediscovering the Gospel of serving love and loving service, as in today's readings. It means leaving behind a way of being church which is no longer effective or even at the service of the Good News. The second is to recover again the teaching *about* Jesus, specifically about his death and resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit. As Pope Benedict puts it philosophically:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.

St Paul puts it poetically:

But as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the one who was proclaimed among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but it has always been "Yes" in him. For every one of God's promises are "Yes" in him; therefore also through him the "Amen" is spoken, to the glory we give to God. (2 Corinthians 1:18-20)

To a significant degree, the institutional church has lost its way. If we can capture again that original vision, then we can begin to look at how we should be a church to serve that vision. In that order. Anything less would be a re-arranging the deckchairs.

Conclusion

In my own thinking, I've been greatly helped by an American writer called Phyllis Tickle. She wrote a book called *The Great Emergence - How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Baker Books, 2008). She notes that about every 500 years, there's a huge upheaval in Christianity, most notably the European Reformation. Right now, we are in the middle of another such upheaval. When in the middle, it is virtually impossible to assess what is happening and to make good discernments about the future. What history shows is that such radical, seismic upheavals do eventually lead to new, unexpected and dynamic ways of being Christian and of being a community of faith. That is our hope.

It is possible, but not guaranteed, that the projected consultation *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission* may be exactly what we need.