

The 19th Sunday of Year C: Religious Faith & the ‘Waiting Game’.
First Reading: Wisdom 18:6-9: The Exodus: Jews’ patient faith rewarded;
Second Reading: Hebrews 11:1-2+8-19: More examples of faith rewarded;
Gospel: Luke 12:32-48: Faith also needs practical action by us.

One of the contrasts noticed by travellers from Western Europe, North America & Australia to the rest of the world is the attitude to religious belief and practice. Here (and in North America & Australia) religion is usually sidelined (often mocked) and those – especially the young - who practise it are often seen as ‘odd’ by many in the media and academic life. This is not the case elsewhere. Not just in the poor third world, but also in wealthy countries - such as those in the Far East - religion is seen as part of the public life of society. This is not because they are less ‘developed’; it is just that the things that shape their world (media, universities, etc) have been less affected by the anti-religious philosophy that has dominated our public life since the 1960’s.

This means that our Churches have an uphill struggle to win people’s minds. When I was ordained priest in 1971, the RC population was about 12% of the North East’s regional total, and in this diocese, over 100,000 were at Mass each week. What a change! Now, I suspect that we are less than 7% of the region’s population, and the Mass attendance before the pandemic was under 30,000 – it’s far lower now. One reason is smaller families (more dying than being born); another is the social unpopularity of “church-going” (as mentioned above). However, I fear that other problems have been self-inflicted. Some priests & teachers saw the 1960’s Vatican Council changes (with which most lay people agreed – especially using English in the liturgy) as meaning that “anything goes”; they abandoned much of the sense of the “holy” at Mass, and made the Faith into a sort of social pressure group, with little moral teaching. I’ll make a short reference to the awful child-abuse problem - and how it was handled. Many lay people felt that a clerical clique had just looked after itself. Taken together, all these have helped to make faith seem outdated & irrelevant.

That’s the problem, so where can we go from here? It is essential that we don’t forget the lessons to be learned from the Bible and Church History, because, although our technology is far more advanced than in the past, human nature isn’t, and behaviour patterns often stay the same. The first reading (Wisdom 18 – you’ll need a post-1970 missal or an RC Bible for it) talks about “that night” of the Exodus – the rescue of the Jews from Egyptian slavery by God’s power, about 1250 BC. The missal translation is not very clear, but the gist is that the people

had been praying & hoping for years for freedom; often, all had seemed lost. I think the second reading (Hebrews 11) is more useful: the writer gives the example of faith shown by Abraham and his wife Sarah about 1850 BC. The point is that their faith was not just a matter of believing certain facts about God: it involved a relationship of trust, coupled with practical action. Abraham trusted so much that he was willing obey God's request that he join the migration round the 'fertile crescent' (as that region is often called), by abandoning his native land (modern Iraq) for a new home (in modern Israel).

Some of the great movements in Church History have involved similarly brave decisions. When Francis of Assisi launched his movement, the Church in Italy was at a low ebb: materialism and soft living had eroded the faith of many rich families. Thus, it took a brave decision by Francis & his followers to start their new movement. Most wealthy Christians – including many clergy – thought he was barmy, but he persevered, and altered the Church's moral tone. Later, after the Reformation in north-west Europe, there were many brave Catholics in Southern Europe who knew that things had to change, otherwise the Church would be lost there as well. This took faith & courage to achieve.

What can we learn from these examples? In our society, the sad fact seems to be that, as we have grown wealthier & healthier (good things), we have felt less 'need' for religion. Perhaps, in the past, we have seen faith as a "crutch" on which to lean in times of worry & poverty. Military chaplains used to joke that there weren't many atheists in first world war trenches or on second world war warships. That may have been true, but it also meant that people turned to God mainly in emergencies. For most now (thankfully) this is not the case, so we have to make religious faith relate to people who are not in trouble.

If I knew how to do that, I'd write a book, make a fortune and retire to Tahiti. (I wouldn't, honest!) I would suggest that we all need a sense of purpose to life that isn't just money or pleasure – something 'out there' that calls us out of ourselves. For some, it is politics, sport or a professional career; but religion always involves a sense of the "other" – a mystery beyond us, that is attractive, but a wee bit scary at the same time. For us, that mysterious presence is God – all-loving, but also all-powerful, and supreme in its creative force. To me, the more science learns about the universe (especially with the latest extra-terrestrial telescope), the more marvellous it appears – as does its Creator. I ask families to pass this sort of thinking on to their growing children, so they can see that faith enriches us as humans; it does not diminish us. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

