

## **Homily On Pope Francis' first Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelii Gaudium (issued on 24th November 2013)**

Today we celebrate the beginning of a new liturgical year. It is the 1st Sunday of Advent. Last Sunday Pope Francis published his first Apostolic Exhortation in which he presented the results of the Synod of Bishops held last year on the topic of the New Evangelisation. Pope Francis entitled his Exhortation: 'The Joy of the Gospel'. In it he has taken the opportunity to present some key elements of the agenda he has for his Papacy and for the Catholic Church. On my website I have offered a homily based on the Readings of today's Mass. Because of the importance of the Pope's exhortation, I have chosen to reflect with you on what appear to me some key points. You can get the complete document on the Vatican website. Just Google Vatican and follow the prompts.

In the opening paragraph Pope Francis writes: 'The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and the lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept this offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.' He is asking us to examine our lives. Do we cherish the freedom we are offered as disciples of Jesus and members of the Church. If we do, we must want others to share this freedom and this joy, for surely we realise that it is meant for everyone, no matter how lost we might be, however sinful. Christ, the Pope assures us, never tires of forgiving (paragraph 3). He goes on to ask: 'if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives how can we fail to share that love with others?'(paragraph 8).

He speaks of three groups who need to hear the Gospel of God's love. The first group is 'the faithful who regularly take part in community worship – a group such as us who are present at this Eucharist. Importantly, he includes in this group 'those members of the faithful who preserve a deep and sincere faith, expressing it in different ways, but seldom taking part in worship.' This is very encouraging to us, for we all have people who are close to us, who identify as being Catholic, but who do not come regularly to Mass. The second group are people who have been baptised but have no connection with the Church, and the third group are those who ignore or even reject God, for they, too, experience a yearning for love and a yearning for meaning. They need to hear the Good News and surely we want to share it with them.

He reminds us of the privilege we have to share the joy we have and to point others to what he calls 'a horizon of beauty and a delicious banquet'. Surely we want to attract others to the life we are privileged to know and live (paragraph 14).

After these introductory remarks, in Chapter One of his Exhortation, Pope Francis issues a challenge to each of us and to us as a parish. 'Go out to others', he writes, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast' (paragraph 24). The Church is in constant need of reform. This is obvious because it is a Church of sinners. During his life on earth Jesus ate with sinners. It has always been this way. What the Pope wants to stress in this Exhortation is the need for the Church to change so that it truly is a missionary Church.

He acknowledges that the Papacy needs to change (par 32), that Dioceses need to change (par 30), that parishes need to change (par 28), and the key change is not for the purpose of a better church organisation, but so that we might be energised to reach out to everyone as a truly

missionary Church (par. 31).

A key dimension of this reform is expressed by the Pope as follows: “I am conscious of the need to promote a sound decentralization’. It is inspiring to note how often he quotes from Bishops’ Conferences. Again and again he states that he doesn’t pretend to have the answers, but he does want to offer his view, and to be open to listen to others. Only together can we reform our Church to make it truly missionary.

Importantly, he reminds us of what, following the Vatican Council , he calls the ‘hierarchy of truths’. We must concentrate on what he calls the essentials, ‘on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing, and at the same time most essential.’(par. 35). This is true of what we are to believe, but also of what we are to do (par 36). So often we get caught up on matters which , however important they may be, are nevertheless secondary (par 34).

As regards the Eucharist he reminds us that ‘it is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak’ (par 47).

In Chapter 2 he analyses the challenges facing evangelization in today’s world. He speaks of what he calls ‘an economy of exclusion’ (par 54), the idolatry of money (par 55-56). How we are ruled by the financial system (par 57-58), how inequality spawns violence (par 59-60). He reminds us of the wonderful contribution that the Church makes to the world (par 76), but stresses ‘True faith in the Incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.’

He speaks of the sickness of what we call ‘clericalism’ and of the danger of those seeking authority in the Church, not in order to offer their lives in loving service of others, but because of ‘affective insecurity or the pursuit of power, human glory or economic well-being’ (par 107).

In Chapter 3 he shares with us his ideas on the way we are to share the Good News with others and in Chapter 4 he reminds us of the social dimension of spreading the Gospel. Our culture is geared to limit religion to the private domain. We cannot let this happen. Our faith embraces every aspect of human living, and is especially concerned with ensuring dignity and opportunity to the poor, to the disadvantaged, to the vulnerable (par. 209). ‘Life for all’ he writes, ‘must have priority over the appropriation of goods by a few’ (par 188).

He has this to say regarding politics: ‘I ask God to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not simply the appearances – of the evils in our world! Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good ... I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor! It is vital that government leaders and financial leaders take heed and broaden their horizons, working to ensure that all citizens have dignified work, education and healthcare. Why not turn to God and ask him to inspire their plans? I am firmly convinced that openness to the transcendent can bring about a new political and economic mindset which would help to break down the wall of separation between the economy and the common good of society.’(par. 205).

He writes beautifully of the importance of ecumenism: of Christians sharing with each other: 'Ecumenism is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us. To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of Episcopal collegiality and the experience of synods. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.'(n. 246). This last point is a further indication of his desire to reverse the process whereby power in the Church has tended to locate itself in the centre.

Finally, in Chapter 5 he speaks of 'Spirit filled evangelizers'. If we are going to take seriously the call that comes with baptism to share the faith with others, if we are truly committed to building a new world: ', we do so, not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives.'

There is a lot more to this Exhortation that I can present here. We need to come together and discuss its implications for us as persons and as a parish. The fundamental point Pope Francis makes, is that we enjoy intimacy with Jesus, and that we make our contribution to bringing this joy to our needy, yearning, and often confused, but beautiful world.