

## 27th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

The Responsorial Psalm of today's Mass (Psalm 80) was written at a time of national disaster. The author likens the people to a vine that was planted and cared for by God, who has now abandoned it. He understands the disaster as an expression of God's disapproval and anger. Knowing that their only hope lies in God, he pleads in the refrain that is repeated throughout the psalm: 'Let your face shine upon us and we shall be saved'. He knows that he and the rest of the nation are not innocent, and so he promises: 'We shall never forsake you again'.

Isaiah in the First Reading also speaks of Israel as a vine. He explains why God has allowed his vineyard Israel to be despoiled: 'God expected justice (mishpat), but found a cover up (mishpah); God expected integrity (tse~~d~~aqah), but there was only a cry of distress (tse'aqah)'. As the Hebrew words (given here in English lettering) indicate, the words look alike and sound alike. People in positions of power can give things the appearance of justice and integrity, but the reality can be very different. This is consistent with one of the central themes of the prophets. They expose not simply injustices, but hidden injustices, especially injustices that are supported by law: the injustices of the powerful who can get away with it. Isaiah is screaming out to those responsible for justice to do what they are pretending to do. God does not want look-alike justice. God wants the real thing.

Jesus, too, likens the community to a vine. He, too, is aiming his critique especially against the religious leaders of his day who are responsible for carrying out God's will by caring for the community, but who are unfaithful to the covenant, who use God's gifts for their own advantage, and who reject the prophets sent to speak God's word to them. Since God will not be thwarted in his love, he will take away his kingdom from them and give it to a community – Matthew understands this as the Christian Church – which will produce proper fruit.

We are this Christian church. We are assured of the presence of the Spirit of Jesus in our midst. Today, this same Spirit is challenging the religious leaders of our Church, and all who have the privilege and authority to tend the vine, to examine our corporate conscience. Jesus' life is not obscure. Look at the fruit he produced. The Church is meant to be his body in the world. It must expect to be crucified as he was. The question we are to ask today is: when we are crucified, what fruit do we produce? When our hearts are pierced, what does the lance reveal? When we are broken as he was, do we continue to offer ourselves in love? When we who are hungry and thirsty and confused come to the Church with our burden of sin what kind of welcome do we receive? Do we find the father of the prodigal son? Do we experience Jesus walking with us in our pain, delighting to be in our company and speaking words of hope?

The honest answer to these questions will be "partly yes and partly no", for the Church is composed of people like you and me who are only partly converted. Where we find the same fruits that we see in the life of Jesus, let our hearts be filled with gratitude and let us celebrate and share the wonders of grace. Where the fruits of grace are lacking, and we find ourselves acting out of fear or greed or pride or a desire to control, then we are called today to repentance.

One of the first steps is the courage to stand before the truth of who we really are, for good and for ill. This is precisely the grace for which we prayed in the opening prayer of today's Mass. Do

we always seek the truth? Even when it is embarrassing? Even when it means that we have to admit we have been wrong? Even when it means financial loss, or loss of reputation? Are we willing to change our minds when evidence shows that we are wrong? Or do we automatically defend our ideas just because they are ours? Do we want the truth whatever the cost?

Over a hundred years ago, Cardinal Newman spoke out against so-called 'liberal' views that were being advocated in the England of his day. He was speaking primarily of truth as regards religion, but what he has to say applies to every dimension of reality. The self-acclaimed 'liberal' view he writes (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, pages 357-358) 'is that truth and falsehood in religion are but matter of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that; that no one is answerable for his opinions; that ... it is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess ... that we may take up and lay down opinions at pleasure ... that we may safely trust to ourselves in matters of faith and need no other guide.'

Against this view Newman claims 'that there is a truth; that there is one truth; that religious error is of itself of an immoral nature; that those who maintain it, unless they do so involuntarily, are guilty in maintaining it; that religious error is to be dreaded; that the search for truth is not the gratification of curiosity ... that the mind is below truth, not above it, and is bound, not to descant upon it, but to venerate it; that truth and falsehood are set before us for the trial of our hearts.'

Towards the end of his long life, on the occasion of his being made a cardinal (Rome 1879), Newman returned to this theme: 'Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with the recognition of any religion, as *true*. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy.'

This is not to claim that any one of us has a complete grasp of the truth. It is not to claim that we have a right or duty to impose on others whatever truth we do have. The Declaration on Religious Liberty from the Second Vatican Council has this to say: 'Truth can impose itself on the human mind only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power ... The Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups, and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his or her convictions nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his or her convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others'(n.1-2). The point Newman is making is not that people should be forced to conform to the truth – though sometimes the common good requires the protection of law against those who would use their power to over-ride the rights of others. Newman is not advocating that we impose truth on others. But he is fighting against a way of thinking that makes everything relative as though reality is of no consequence and we have no obligation to search for the truth, and when we find it to submit to it. This point is made also in the Vatican Council Declaration on Religious Liberty: 'Because we are persons endowed with reason and free will and therefore bearing

personal responsibility, we are all impelled by our nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. We are also bound to adhere to the truth once we come to know it and to direct our lives in accordance with the demands of truth'(n.2).

The relativism against which Newman spoke so urgently over a hundred years ago is one of the key assumptions that underlie almost any discussion today. Most ordinary people know that it matters how things actually are, and that we have to face the facts if we are to get anywhere. But we can't help breathing in the smog of relativism, and we hardly notice that our minds are being befuddled by it.

A person is considered a reactionary if he or she questions people's absolute right to think and act as they choose. We draw the line in some areas. If a river is running through my property, I am not allowed to pour junk into it because it is in my property. The river goes on to others and they, too, have rights which the State must protect. But I can pollute the inter-net almost at will. I can claim freedom of speech to say almost anything so long as I am careful to stay within the laws concerning libel. I can hide behind parliamentary privilege to put something into the public arena without fear of being prosecuted. My understanding is that parliamentary privilege was instituted so that within parliament, and so away from the public eye, matters could be freely shared. This has all changed so that now what is said in p[arliament is broadcasted publicly. Intelligent people in all walks of life have been seduced into accepting that in all kinds of areas people have a right to choose and no one has a right to argue with their choice even when the very fabric of society is being seriously undermined.

For our reflections today we would do well to look at our own lives - and this applies especially to those of us in positions of authority in the Church. We are being challenged to ask ourselves: Are we committed to stand before the truth, in whatever way it affects our life? In the Responsorial Psalm we prayed that God would let his face shine upon us. Only then will we be saved, but we cannot fool God, for God sees things as they really are. God knows the truth. As disciples of Jesus we have had the privilege of looking upon the face of Jesus. Everything about him tells us of God's desire to forgive and of God's promise of grace. Jesus is the vine of today's readings. If we listen to him and bind our hearts to him, he will give us the sap of his Spirit who will reveal to us where we are failing. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6). The Spirit of Jesus will give us the courage to stand before the truth that alone can set us free (John 8:32), and encourage us to 'do the truth in love'(Ephesians 4:15).