

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Roman)/ 3rd SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Byzantine)- All Saints of Britain and Ireland and others.

We live at a very odd moment in time. The old certainties are gone- politically, socially, cultural and religiously. The old, dominating antagonisms that shaped so much of our lives- like the Soviet-West conflict- which in a certain way established stability for us, have given way to new kinds of discord- like the Islamic-West hostility- which we don't seem fully to understand yet.

The collapse of Communism, which few people anticipated, seemed to end revolutionary movements throughout most of the world, and to establish the hegemony of Western capitalism. The financial, economic crisis of the last few years has, however, shown us just how brittle the seeming fortress of Western capitalism really is.

The nuclear meltdown in Japan has reminded us that even with the ending of the Cold War, the splitting of the atom unleashed destructive forces that we may not be able to control even when we intend to use its power for good.

Tsunamis, earthquakes, the melting of the polar ice caps, the use of carbon fuels and the green-house effect it has on our environment all remind us of just how fragile our earth and human life really are.

Within the Christian world, the 2nd Vatican Council overturned centuries-old patterns of thinking, believing and acting within the Catholic community, which influenced nearly all of Christianity, but which at the same time also created immense internal antagonisms and discord which seem to have splintered Catholicism internally, if not outwardly.

At the same time, the center of gravity within the Christian world is shifting quite rapidly. Europe, North America, the English-speaking world of the former British Empire- the old centers- are all ailing. Within a few decades the average, ordinary Christian in the world will no longer be white, will no longer be from the northern hemisphere, and will no longer be wealthy. The average, ordinary Christian will be a Black woman in a small village in Africa. The strength and power of Christianity is shifting southwards geographically.

Life today seems to be light-years away from those earlier, now seemingly almost idyllic, or at least more understandable, times of the 50s and 60s that we older ones may remember. You young ones- and that includes everyone under the age of about 35!- probably have little idea of how much change we old people have actually lived through during the past 50 years. It hasn't always been easy, and it often has been terribly confusing.

The question which stands in front of us, in the midst of all of this change, is a very simple, yet very profound, question: What does it mean, what does it look like, in an age such as ours to be a Christian, to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth whom we identify as our Lord and our Savior?

One of the great temptations, and I am absolutely convinced that it is a temptation, is to allow ourselves to fall victim to the sin of nostalgia, to comfort ourselves, at a time of confusion and upheaval with the desire to return in some way to a previous age, to what we think was a "golden period" when faith was stronger, when the Church was more in control of things, when obedience was the stance of the Christian community. This sin of nostalgia- and I'll explain in a moment why I think it is a sin- is often coupled with a lust for certainty, with an

intense desire to have clarity about as many things as we possibly can, to have the old order restored, to have morality reestablished.

This posture often goes hand-in-hand with constant complaints about how permissive our society has become. What people often fail to realize is that what we see as permissiveness only reflects the uncertainty of how to embody moral values in the concrete when the old forms no longer fit and new forms have not yet clearly emerged. When a new social order, whatever it is, finally has established itself, conformity will once again replace permissiveness. We have to keep in mind that moral conformity is no more a Christian virtue than moral permissiveness.

But the desire for the old social order, and everything that it seemed to represent, can be very strong and tempting for Christians. And now there are many, many expressions within the Christian communities of a nostalgic reaction to our historical moment. But these expressions of, and desire for, somehow “going back” represent, it seems to me, a real failure of faith, a real failure of courage and of what it means to be disciples of Jesus, to trust in God, to accept what Christ came to give.

And what is it that He came to give? What does trust in God mean? What does being a disciple of Jesus look like? We heard the answer to these questions in our epistle today. The problem, though, is that we so often hear the words but we find it hard to hear the message:

[Roman]: “You,” St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you. Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. If the Spirit

of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

[Byzantine]: “Now hope does not disappoint”, St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

To have Spirit of the Messiah, the Spirit of the Christ, the Spirit of God, in us, dwelling in us, is what being a Christian is. To have the Spirit of the Messiah animating us, shaping us, forming us now, in this age, in this situation, in this context. is what Christian faith and discipleship mean.

- Already in the 4th century, another period of tremendous turmoil in our history, St. Athanasius said, “the Word took on flesh so that we might receive the Holy Spirit”.
- St. Symeon the New Theologian in the 10th century put it like this, “the goal and purpose of all of Christ’s work of salvation for us was that believers should receive the Holy Spirit”.
- And then my favorite, the 19th century St. Seraphim of Sarov expressed it like this: “Prayer, fasting, works of mercy – all this is very good, but it represents only the means, not the end of the Christian life. The true end is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.”

These are not just obtuse theological words. They describe what Christians of every age and every time have to realize if they are to live meaningfully and fully as disciples of Jesus . To have the Spirit of the Messiah, the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, dwelling in us, poured into our hearts, this is the goal of Christian discipleship.

But you may well ask, “Don’t we all have the Spirit, the Spirit given in Baptism, in Confirmation/Chrismation, in the Eucharist?” Well, yes, the Gift is given, but the real question is whether, and to what degree, we have opened ourselves to the Gift. I may well have the Spirit in me, but do I allow that Spirit to animate me, to shape me, to form me, so that the life of Jesus become my life, so that I can begin to respond to the questions and problems and challenges of this age out of the very same Spirit that animated Jesus the Messiah. This requires real work, real effort, real struggle, because I know there is so much stuff in my life that fights against this Spirit of God.

Our salvation and our task at this present moment is not to engage in a nostalgic desire for some kind of imaginary previous “golden spiritual age”- that desire is a great temptation during times of confusion and change and anxiety. But it is an illusion and I would say, a work of the evil one, because it pulls us away from the real work- the work of allowing the Spirit of the Messiah, who is in each of us, to form in us the mind of Jesus so that we can be His hands, and His voice, and His presence today, right now. To draw near and to learn to listen for the voice of Jesus in the Scriptures, in prayer, in the Eucharist- this is the age-old discipline, the means, for acquiring the Spirit of the Messiah.

We do live in a very odd and confusing moment in time. But it is also the time that God has given to each of us to be His sons and daughters, to be disciples of Jesus, to receive and to be animated by the Spirit of the Messiah. This is our task. And it can also be both our joy and our salvation.