

Scandal in the Church

Last weekend we read again the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. We identified our own temptations with those of Jesus. Today, by contrast we are with Peter and James and John on Mount Tabor as Jesus is transfigured. They struggle to describe what is really indescribable. They see the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus. We have this same sequence of readings each year, the temptation in The wilderness on the first Sunday of Lent and the transfiguration on the second.

It seems to me that this year particularly we need to share, however imperfectly, that experience of joy and transformation. The Church is living through a time of trial. We are all too conscious of the scandals that are emerging in different parts of the world. For many people these things are truly a scandal, that is an obstacle to Faith. Men and women feel unable any longer to practice the Faith which is being so compromised by the behaviour of men in positions of great trust and great responsibility.

We are not talking here about sins of human weakness. None of us is perfect. We know, if we are honest, that we do not always live by the Gospel. We allow ourselves to model the behaviour of those around us rather than to model ourselves on Christ. It has always been so. Christ's first hand picked apostles were very obviously weak and imperfect.

It is interesting to look at the men Jesus chose. If the Twelve Apostles were to take part in a modern seminary selection conference I think most of them would fail. Only two would be likely candidates. John was young and a good health risk. Judas had business acumen, but as for the rest.....maybe not.

Down the ages the men chosen to be bishops and priests have been a mixed bunch. Like any group we can point to different characters. There have been many great Saints, St. Vincent de Paul, St John Bosco, Blessed John Henry Newman, and so many others.

At the same time we can think of other men who had their weaknesses and their failings, but who tried to the best of their ability to be faithful to the Lord and generous in serving others. We might think of them as sinners, like us, but pilgrims, like us, struggling in their journey through life. We thank God for them and for their faithfulness.

The things that are causing scandal today in different parts of the world are something altogether different. We are talking of wickedness and evil in high places. Weakness and frailty we understand, but this is something else.

In the long history of the Church there have always been scandals, usually associated with money or power or sex, or all three. They always involve a betrayal of trust and an abuse of power.

What we have today certainly involves both a betrayal of trust and an abuse of power, but over and above that it represents an attack on the innocent and the vulnerable. I don't need to spell it out.

Two questions come to mind. Why have these things happened, and how are we to react as ordinary Catholics?

You can point to many possible causes, but I believe the underlying cause is a loss of faith. If you truly believe in the reality of God and his judgement how you possibly do these terrible things? How could you possibly approach the altar of God and the Blessed Sacrament without recognising the horror of such things and changing your life?

Behind the loss of faith there is always a lack of prayer. You cannot combine for any length of time regular sincere prayer and such deliberate planned evil.

A man who is faithful to prayer will be forced to recognise his sins and make reparation.

Listen to psalm 35

"Sin speaks to the sinner in the depths of his heart.

There is no fear of God before his eyes.

He so flatters himself in his mind that he knows not his guilting his mouth are mischief and deceit.

All wisdom is gone."

We can not abandon Jesus because of a Judas.

Peter is weak and cowardly when it most mattered, but still the Lord entrusts him with the care of the flock.

It is easy to understand why people feel disillusioned and distressed in the face of scandals but our response has to be with Peter,

“Lord to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

The Church is the Body of Christ. Like the first Christians we must remain faithful to prayer and the broken bread of the Eucharist.

I have not found it easy to speak about these things but not to do so, would, I think, be a failure on my part. The Church is in crisis. But I believe that we are all called at this time to renew our commitment to Christ, to persevere and to pray. It certainly isn't easy, but I believe it is what God is asking us to do. Amen.

Mary, Mother of the Church; Pray for us.