

MASS FOR PENTECOST SUNDAY

ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL, EDINBURGH

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

SUNDAY 31 MAY 2009

Introduction:

I welcome you all most warmly to our Metropolitan Cathedral this afternoon for our Pentecost Sunday Mass, invariably described as the 'Missioning Mass'.

The reason for that name is that this is the Mass when those 115 people baptised or received in full communion with our Church at Easter time are now being sent out to live their faith in the Church and in the world.

As your Bishop, I am called upon to address words to you and the words which I use on this occasion are the same words used by Jesus himself in his address to his apostles following on his Resurrection from the dead. He said to them: "Peace be with you! As the Father sent me, so am I sending you!".

Consequently, I am sending you out now into the society of today in our country to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his love and teaching as did those first followers of Jesus himself.

With you on this occasion I wish to consider first of all just what society of today is like in Scotland; and then to consider how we can indeed still bear witness to Christ in this world.

Society of Today:

Just seven weeks ago on Easter Sunday I also preached in our Cathedral and suggested that society was losing the ability to set moral standards and was suffering as a result. There followed much media coverage of what I had said, with many newspaper articles repeating my claim that too often our politicians tend to focus on symptoms rather than causes. I used various examples, giving but three now:

When young people drink too much – they try to restrict sales of alcohol;
 When obesity levels rise dangerously – they urge the food industry to use less fat;
 And when promiscuity leads to an explosion in sexually transmitted infections – they dramatically increase funding for testing and treatment.

Sadly it never seems to occur to our politicians that they **might rather encourage restraint and self-control**. How refreshing it would be to hear our legislators say, even occasionally: "stop drinking", "eat less"; "don't steal"; "don't kill – in the womb, in the streets, in old age"; or "abstain before sexual activity marriage and be faithful within it".

In other words I suggest that in society of today we do not hear our political representatives moralise! And when I preached that sermon, none of my criticisms were countered or refuted. I was left reinforced in my belief that in failing to moralise, in failing to set objective standards of behaviour for a generation, we have created a largely amoral society. I emphasised two areas of our life in society at this present time in a particular way as they affect us so much at present.

First of all, I emphasise ‘love of money’- as we think of the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not steal’:

I know that very many so called ordinary people have been affected by the love of money of so many in positions of responsibility in our banking system and who have responsibility over pension funds. Those who possess a reasonable house, quite a good standard of living, and have arrangements made for their children and their pensions in due course, have been quite shattered at what has happened during this present economic recession – when a bank fails or when they suddenly discover that they have no pension funds available for their retirement.

Many other people have been equally shattered at what we might call the ‘fall from grace’ of many called to serve in politics and public life, with money at the root of many difficulties. Just a few years ago I was preaching in the church of St Mary’s Undercroft in the Houses of Parliament at Westminster – indicating to those gathered there that “we share a vocation founded on the desire to be of use to others and to serve the common good”. I quoted words from the late Pope John Paul II in the great Jubilee Year of 2000 when he declared that St Thomas More was the patron saint of politicians and stated: **“His life teaches us that Government is above all an exercise of virtue”**.

On behalf of very many suffering and bewildered people, I call on those in public service of whatever kind who have failed us to reclaim the high standards which we expect of them and to give the example required of them to all in our country, however difficult it might be to implement this.

Just last year I visited Myanmar, visiting areas devastated by the Cyclone Nargis. I spoke to many survivors of that cyclone, with one in particular speaking in a very articulate way of the loss he had endured of his wife, his child, his home, his whole village. He said at the end of his testimony that “perhaps God is teaching me that we human beings don’t really possess anything for ourselves”. Perhaps that lesson has been brought home to us all in recent months.

Sadly again on this occasion I must speak of the sin of murder – as I think of the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’:

The recently released abortion figures for Scotland have indeed frightened us all with the figures going against the United Kingdom trend to hit a record high. Our Public Health Minister called the figures “disappointing”, while I myself stated that “The statistics confirm the failure of the ‘sexual health strategy’, representing a human rights violation, in our midst, on a massive scale”.

One must see the rise in abortion figures as a component of a growing anti-life mentality as we prepare for ongoing debate about killing the elderly and less able with regard to assisted suicide or euthanasia.

Just two years ago I visited Cambodia and stood in silence looking over the ‘Killing Fields of Cambodia’, which have become so infamous. I shudder to think that now looking across Scotland we are all aware of the ‘Killing Fields of Scotland’ with such a tragic disregard for human life, whether in the womb, on our streets, or in old age.

Solution of Today:

When Christ ascended into Heaven, he promised the gift of the Holy Spirit on his followers – and it is the giving of that gift which we commemorate today. Although we can look in a rather pessimistic way at society around us, as Christians we must be inspired by hope, the Christian hope with which Jesus Christ himself inspired his followers.

In answer to the evils, to the aberrations in our society with regard to both money and murder, I would suggest firstly that **we move from being a largely amoral society to being once more a moral society.**

I see so many people in our society now crying out for the guidance, the guidance which can only come from having a moral compass. I urge those in positions of responsibility in our country and in our Governments in Scotland, Westminster and Europe to act and to lead us on the way ahead before it is too late. I call on them to respond to past criticisms and failures in a tangible and positive way, praying that they will be strengthened and emboldened, whatever has gone wrong in the past, so that they will support and endorse the practical steps aimed at bringing stability to our country, along with an ongoing hope for the future and for the days which lie ahead for ourselves, for our children and our children's children.

I think of those challenging words of the late Pope Paul VI issued almost 40 years ago: "It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustice and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action".

Secondly, I see too with regard to our solutions that **before any society can prosper and endure it must give support and encouragement to the institution of marriage and the place of the family.**

As a society we have failed utterly to do this and have instead in recent years acted again and again to undermine marriage and weaken the family: in abolishing tax benefits for married couples; creating tax credits which favour couples who are not married; giving legal status to cohabitants; speeding up divorce and creating same sex marriages. In these and other ways we have attacked and damaged the foundation stone of our society, the foundation on which any stable society is built.

I think of the tuition and support available to young people as they prepare to sit their driving test. Our government knows that a stringent test and structured tuition at the start will pay dividends later in better driving standards and fewer accidents. I would hope that we will now try to see marriage preparation in the same light; and encourage those who are living together outwith marriage to consider preparing for that great Sacrament.

What we require is nothing less than a nationwide programme of marriage preparation courses and ongoing reconciliation services to help couples who inevitably face difficulties and strains in their relationship. This must all be funded at public expense as a far sighted investment in future stability and will offset the multi-billion pound cost of family fracture, divorce, breakdown, depression and social collapse we currently pay for. I see this as not a competition between morality and money, but rather a recognition that **embracing morality can potentially save us vast amounts of money.**

Just a few weeks ago in Nazareth, the town of the Annunciation and of the Holy Family, Pope Benedict XVI stated: "In the family each person, whether the smallest child or the oldest relative, is valued for himself or herself, and not seen simply as a means to some other end. Here we begin to glimpse something of the essential role of the family as the first building block of a well ordered and welcoming society. We also come to appreciate, within the wider community, the duty of the State to support families in their mission of education, to protect the institution of the family and its inherent rights, and to ensure that all families can live and flourish in conditions of dignity".

Conclusion:

I do indeed send you all out from out Cathedral today hopefully aware of some of the problems which I see in our present society – and pointing the way to solutions which will help solve some of our problems.

I know that I am speaking in a special way to those just received into the Catholic Church and who wish to bear witness to Christ and his love and his teaching in a special way.

However, I am also aware that I am speaking to very many people of other Christian denominations, as well as to many members of the worlds great faiths.

Following on my Easter Sunday sermon, I received an email from a woman who stated:

“Doesn’t it just make you want to weep, how many young people are suffering because of their upbringing or should I say the lack of it – broken homes, no moral guidance, parents not recognising their needs often because of alcohol/drug abuse? My daughter aged 16 has quite a few friends in this position who drink or take drugs themselves or self harm to forget their home circumstances. Although I am not Catholic (I’m a Pentecostal Christian), we clearly have some things in common. If only people would turn to God for guidance in their lives and trust in him”.

We are privileged to have God in our lives. Hopefully, we will indeed trust in him. On this great Feast of Pentecost, remember again that mission Jesus gave to his apostles and keep in mind always those two Commandments which summed up the other ten: ‘Love God; Love your neighbour’.