

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR A, 2020.

I saw this quote taken from William Leith in the Independent on Sunday;

“Organised religion has sunk pretty low these days; the feeling is that it’s just third raters who get involved, oily little tin pot careerists or neurotics, people afraid of the modern world. A twentieth century Cardinal Wolsely would be a film producer or an advertising mogul; Sir Thomas Moore would be a regular guest on late night talk shows. These guys were big time, you can’t imagine them organising coffee mornings or creeping from door to door irritating housewives can you?”

How would you answer this critic of the faith if this was being said to you in a discussion? Firstly, i think there is some unjustifiable criticism. A glance back through the history of the Church, even that part of the Universal Church that is Anglicanism and we can present people, lay and ordained who have been superb disciples of our Lord, changing laws for the good, shaking the world with their faith, changing institutions and winning hearts and minds for Christ. Bishops who have been prayerful, intellectual, and able to make God known by their very words and actions.

But our critic has a point, most of the names that we associate with the Church these days are celebrity clergy, eager to be on the next quiz show or radio programme. Most of the bishops with less than a handful of exceptions, are more intent on parading the Gospel where sin is not important, where Jesus lines up with other gods and philosophies and where faith and the faithful is governed by the politics of the moment rather than the gospel of sacrifice and love.

The sad part about this critics observation is the fact that this is his experience, and he is in a position to make this known widely and is articulate enough to put it in such stark terms. There are countless others who don’t have such exposure that think the same thing. So we come back to the original question, “how do we answer such a person?” St Peter in the Epistle starts us off with an answer. “Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have.”

Such sound advice, and very uncomplicated or so it seems. St Peter links the hope that we have in Jesus with the reverence that we have for Him and forever carry in our hearts. It is the cultivation of this inner disposition that informs our words and deeds, and our words and deeds are powerful tools in the proclamation of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. These are the by product of our reverence for Christ which will be judged by others. And as you know, people are very quick to judge a person who is known to be a practising Christian, think of our critic at the beginning of this address.

The Gospel places our reverence for Christ in his teaching concerning the keeping of His commandments. For some the keeping of the commandments is carried out with more emphasis on duty than on love, and it is the love of Jesus that enables us to keep the commandments. It is a bit like those who see Christianity and the commandments as just a set of criteria that inhibits life rather than be transformative and give life, a list of “do not’s” if you like.

Reverence to Jesus is reverence for his life giving teaching, his commandments, that aim to draw us towards the delight of loving God, and in such delight, to love our neighbour. And this comes with devotion to our Lord, listening to his teaching, meeting him in the sacraments, letting go of our own inclinations to put ourselves above and before him. It is this path of reverence that will enable the commands to be carried out with spontaneity, not grudgingly or with a sense of “if i must”. Carrying out, living out the commandments with love will always point beyond them to the one we seek to love. It is then our character will begin to change and transform more into his likeness, and what used to look just like rules now become invitations to seek to continually do Christ’s bidding.

This leads us to what St Peter says about having our answer ready for those who see in us that Hope that flows from our reverence of God and the love of the commandments. There is attractiveness about a person whose life is lived in the company of God and his angels and saints. Their lives of love for our Lord are living answers to the hope that is set before us. They make God real and allow others to see that reality. Of course it goes without saying that the opposite is equally the case. The life of the Christian that projects little joy, little hope and flouts the love for the commandments plays right into the hands of the critics, as St Peter goes onto say in his epistle about those who

slander may be proved wrong when one is living an upright life but may be proved right if you hold light to the life blood of the faith.

St Thomas Aquinas asks “what is the law of the New Testament?” By which he meant, what is distinctive about the moral practices of Christians’ .And his answer is that principally the law of the New Testament is the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ poured by the Father into human hearts to be among other things the power source of the moral life, for it not only gives us a fuller idea and discernment of what is right and proper from what is wrong and destructive, it gives us the drive and the impetus to do it. This leads us nicely onto the Spirit of love promise to us at Ascensiontide which we will be celebrating next week.

AMEN