

2019 3RD SUNDAY

In a sermon to his family and neighbours in the synagogue of Nazareth- Jesus- at the beginning of His public ministry- outlined what He considered to be the essence of His Ministry.

‘The spirit of the Lord has anointed me to be the Messiah- to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to give to the blind new sight and to set the downtrodden free.’

It was not a popular message. It was not what the people of Nazareth wanted from their Messiah. For in His sermon Jesus did not mention that He had any interest in delivering His people from servitude to the Romans. He did not mention any restoration of the Kingship of David- of Israel becoming powerful once again just as in the days of King David. The citizens of Nazareth were only interested in a Messiah who would lead them to glory and to have status over and above all nations.

Jesus, on the other hand, saw that the primary focus of the Messiah was to bring the people of Israel to a new way of relating with God; to bring them to understand that God is a God of compassion and forgiveness- a Father- and that every person is a precious son or a daughter of God, created to ultimately share in God’s life in heaven.

Jesus believed that He was called to bring about God’s Kingdom on Earth- to bring about a World where Justice, Peace and Love would reign. Jesus, as the Messiah, would call all people to reach out in compassion to the poor and afflicted. He would challenge them to ensure that the downtrodden had a fair share in the wealth of the Earth.

At the heart of Jesus’ Ministry was His belief that all people are made in God’s image and likeness- and are to be respected and treated with love.

And sadly- what we have to admit- is that only a small minority of people throughout history have taken on board what Jesus was really about. Over the years most have simply ignored Jesus’ most basic themes.

Jesus taught directly and clearly on such issues as nonviolence, a simple lifestyle, on love of the poor, on forgiveness, love of enemies, inclusivity, mercy, and of not seeking status, power, perks and possessions.

And we have to admit that throughout Christian history these teachings have been mostly ignored- even by those who call themselves orthodox or biblical.

Why? Because what Jesus was asking for demanded people to change their lifestyle. And nobody wants change. In the famous words of G.K. Chesterton: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried." And the Church shares in the guilt in this. The things that have been emphasized within the Church over the years have been intellectual beliefs like the divinity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the Trinity and so on that have asked little of people in the way of lifestyle changes. They are important beliefs, don't get me wrong, but they don't make demands on our lifestyle.

It is often said that the person whose life came closest to modelling the teachings of Christ was St. Francis of Assisi. He lived a life of radical poverty and reached out in a sublime way to embrace all people- be they Christian or Moslem, be they saint or sinner, be they scholars or illiterates. St. Francis saw God shining out from all of creation. He saw God in all people, all animals, all the trees and flowers; in the sun, in planets and stars.

When on March 13th 2013 Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina announced that he would be taking the name Pope Francis, we should have twigged immediately that in him we would have a Pope with a far different agenda than what we have been used to for the last 2000 years.

Pope Francis takes St. Francis' example very seriously. And, let's be honest, in taking St Francis seriously, he is taking Jesus Christ very seriously.

Pope Francis has been telling the Church that while Church teachings are important and must be protected and cherished, our primary focus must be on living out the agenda preached by Jesus in today's Gospel.

And so during this Week Pope Francis has joined 150,000 young people at World Youth Day in Panama City.

What will the themes of his exhortations? One can be absolutely certain that his priority will be for the Catholic Youth of the world to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to set the downtrodden free. He will assuredly speak against the rampant poverty of ordinary people in Central America and beyond. He will castigate the corruption within Governments and the power of evil within the local drug syndicates. He will

speaking against all types of oppression. He will most certainly highlight the issue of emigration.

One afternoon he will visit 192 young inmates in a Juvenile Detention Centre in Panama City and will spend time hearing their Confessions.

Some powerful Catholics are getting impatient with Pope Francis for much the same reasons as many people in Nazareth grew impatient with Jesus.

But be clear. Pope Francis is not tossing out what is important. He will most certainly encourage the Youth of the World to embrace the Mass and the Sacraments and to be proud of being Catholics. But his real emphasis will be on challenging them to dramatically live the Gospel- by addressing issues of injustice and poverty.

Our Pope is an extraordinary Pope- in the same way as St Francis of Assisi was extraordinary. Both powerfully mirror Jesus Christ.

We must pray for him- every day. We must thank God for him. He is a wonderful gift. And we must try to open our hearts to what he is preaching. It is so faithful to the Gospel.