

## **HOMILY – FR JEREMY – CHURCH OF SCOTLAND, WINCHBURGH, 24 JUNE 2018**

It is a privilege and honour to come to Winchburgh Parish Church today, Sunday, the day of the Lord Jesus's Resurrection, a week after Rev Scott Marshall addressed my own, St Philomena's Parish congregation, on the Holy Scriptures. His message was indeed, by all accounts, well received. I always think, as Ministers of Religion in the Christian Faith, it is a great responsibility to unpack the Holy Word of God for our own times. I have based the choice of scripture readings today on the theme of building faith and striving for unity.

One thing we can say without doubt is that we all have a heart. Many think it is as difficult to change the human heart in a spiritual sense as it is in a physical sense. Heart transplants are always delicate. Because some have no hope of changing human beings, they accept them as they are, preferring to overlook mediocrity and sinfulness. Others become bitter about everything an everyone. Cynicism in a way a partial death.

In this text from Eze 36:24-28, which is quite similar to Jeremiah 31:31, (The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the People of God), God offers to give a new heart to those who will be his future people. The historical experience then, of the Israelites, shows that human beings are weak and often unable to follow the Commandments.

But, if an individual knows his God personally, to the point of sharing closely in God's life, is there no possibility of change and renewal? This is the meaning of the word conversion. To be converted means to come back to God after having been away from him.

First, there is a change that takes place in the heart, that is to say, in the innermost part of the human being. Then, there is a change of mentality and of attitude. As we learned together, in our Lent House Group on Hope, it is God who is the one who converts people by loving them, attracting them and giving them His spirit, which most importantly, transforms their whole existence. As Ezekiel prophesized so powerfully, "I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh".

In truth, as is said many times in Holy Scripture, we are weak and often need to call on the help of God, to help us follow the Commandments, to repent of our sins and allow our conscience to be governed by a divine power much greater than our own.

As it says in Holy Scripture, 'Oh God, come to my aid, O Lord, make haste to help us'. I really believe that the call to conversion happens many times in our relatively short lives on earth, the Spirit of God awakening us to new horizons and encouraging us towards a universality of Christian life, that is fundamentally engaging, truthful, caring and grateful. That, at this time of the year, especially, as the corn ripens, the branches are heavy with fruit and sheep and cattle graze, we rejoice together in God's creation.

The prayer of Pere Teilhard de Chardin is appropriate here, (On the dawn of a new day) – Sunrise. "In the distance, the sun has just illuminated the remote outline of the first Orient. Once again, under the changing cascade of the rays, the live surface of the earth awakens, shudders and begins again, its amazing labour. O My God, I will offer you the desired harvest of this first effort. In my cup, I will present to you the sap of all the fruits which be crushed today". He goes on to write that God really seeks from us all, is, "the development of the world by universal progress and conversion". In the heart of the formless mass you placed – (I am sure of it because I feel it) – an irresistible and sanctifying desire which, from the wicked to the faithful, makes us all shout "Lord make us One"! As Burns implored, "A man's a man for all that, and all that".

De Chardin, in a way, was a prophet of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, who after the horrors of two world wars and the Jewish Holocaust, marked the rise of Ecumenism and Inter-Faith work in the 60s, 70s and beyond, throughout Western Europe.

Faith in God is fundamentally unitive, it seeks to recognise diversity and creativity while holding to the universal values that are rooted in communal love. Sin and evil is, on the other hand, divisive, bitter and generates fear and hatred. Jesus came, as the Son of God, to proclaim a universal message, that seeks to unite all

nations, in one God. His apostolic exhortation, after the Resurrection, was ‘Go out, make disciples from all nations, Baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to fulfil all I have commanded you. I am with you always, until the end of the world’.

And again, in John 17:11,17-23, which we have just heard, Jesus is prayerfully encouraging His disciples to build up the new holy people. That they may all be one. What man has divided, may God once again, unite. Yes, turning to God in Faith, may, as Jesus prophesied, divide families but still the long-term objective is unity through persecution, self-sacrifice and unconditional love.

St Clement, a Roman citizen, was ostracized by his family for becoming a Christian and went to live on the streets. St Thomas Aquinas was locked in a tower when his family heard he was determined to be a Dominican Monk.

Through all the troubles of Religion and culture, we must remember the power of the Holy Spirit at work. As St Paul reminds us, in Colossians 1, “Give us knowledge and wisdom, from which springs good works and love”.

The word ‘Catholic’ means, simply, universal. Through a common Baptism, no one is a stranger. One faith, but perhaps, many traditions. There are many traditions in the Catholic Church, Armenians, Ukrainians, Syro-Malabars, Ambrosian etc, just as there are many traditions or branches of the Presbyterian form of Christianity.

The history of the Church seems to run counter to the prayer of Christ. Jesus desired unity, the evangelists relate in the Gospel, how Peter was named as the visible head of the Apostles and the entire Church. However, to maintain unity among peoples of different cultures temperaments and ruling structures requires much love, wisdom and understanding, much conversion in a way.

For historical reasons, the countries of the Roman world, including our Caledonia, or present-day Scotland, were divided into two main empires, West and East, Rome and Constantinople. Subsequent barbarian or pagan invasions of the two empires, leading to the fall of the Roman Empire, put great strain of the unitive spirit of East and West, leading to the Great Schism, with the Orthodox, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.

In Western Europe, the negligence of the Catholic Papacy and Bishops, in not ending the abuses and useless human traditions of buying and selling of relics and indulgencies, led to the Protestant Evangelicals, to establish new churches, which were called ‘Reformed Churches’. The separation however had deeper political, social and economic roots, as we know from our Scottish history. It was key moment in Scottish history which then led onto the enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, which caused us to review our thinking and our living out of Holy Scripture, philosophy and politics.

A sort of polarization of Scottish political, social and religious life took place over 300 years, according to whether you were Protestant or Roman Catholic.

Thankfully, in our times, we have a better understanding of these past difficulties. Many Protestants, Orthodox and Catholics are attempting to unite as Christian believers. I have personally the benefit of a Presbyterian Grandfather, two Welsh Anglican Grandparents and a Highland Catholic Granny. After four years at a Jesuit Boarding School, I had four years at Glasgow Academy, very much Presbyterian.

At the same time, however, challenges are existing in each Church. Today, Christians disagree and are split, not only in their political options but also on moral issues, re Marriage and family and on strict versus liberal interpretations of Holy Scripture. Heated debates occur on what it truly means to be Christ-centred and the danger of justifying sinful acts. The key, as St Augustine wrote in his Confessions, is to persevere, never give up and as St Paul said, your endurance will win you your lives.

Our Ecumenical activities in Winchburgh, are a sign of real hope and what can be achieved. That we focus on what we can do well together and overcome the ignorance and fearful uncentredness of the past. All of

us have to work so that the unity of Christians, that Jesus earnestly desires, is brought to fruition. To truthfully celebrate diversity and value what unites us.

Amen