

## HOMILY – 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – 21 JANUARY 2018

Theme: 'The Fear of Encounter'

In the first Reading from Jonah, Jonah is frightened to encounter the People of Nineveh. To come into an alien, ungodly city for fear of how he will be treated, how they respond to his presence. It took 3 days to cross a city!

Encounter with others is something that can affect us deeply, especially if we are afraid. Jesus comes as God and man. He stands among us and declares boldly, 'Do not be afraid'! Why? Because He can see we are frightened. Frightened of what? Frightened of being challenged maybe or having to reveal our true selves, or again frightened of being found guilty or frightened of the unknown.

The present society in Scotland is very conflicting. People in the street are more afraid of encounter. You notice more people going around in sunglasses, when there is no sun and shut in by earplugs and earphones, shutting out the risk of encountering another human being. On the other hand, there are those not afraid to bare their souls on the internet/Facebook, to unknown strangers. And, in schools, children of all ages, not afraid to stand on the stage and audition for 'Stars in your Eyes' or the 'X Factor'.

The truth is that traditional ways of encountering others in life are diminishing, places of encounter are shutting down, social clubs, pubs, post offices, churches, banks, even shops, due to internet shopping. You could almost not leave your house and have everything delivered. Some churches are even broadcasting Mass, via the internet. McDonalds Drive throughs, peoples' friendships are replaced by dogs and cats.

But is this good for the body and soul? The BBC recently highlighted the increasing problem of loneliness in Scotland while failing to come up with a solution of coming to Mass on a Sunday. TV itself discourages social interaction. If we leave God out, we never find the solution.

Jesus, in the Gospel today, goes out and encounters his future apostles, Simon and Andrew, James and John. Instead of being away, alone at sea, to come on dry land and be willing to encounter the Gentiles and Jews, with the Good News. The word 'Apostle' comes from the Greek word, 'Apostolos', meaning 'to be sent out'.

But, that is where the challenge is! Firstly, that the Apostles have the courage and the will to go out, like Jonah, the prophet, to alien, pagan, frightened and hostile peoples. Imagine going to Edinburgh, preaching on the Castle Rock and threatening to destroy the city? Secondly, that they have the faith in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to speak in words that come from God. Thirdly, that the people are willing and open to what is being said or taught.

Going back to what I said earlier, nowadays there is a growing reluctance to encounter clergy in our homes and for the clergy (successors to the Apostles) to be encountered. In past times, when the priest called, everyone was expected to be on their best behavior. Nowadays, with abuses of breaches of trust and the 'fear culture' many homes are inaccessible. This is very sad but almost inevitable. Social evil feeds on fear.

The question for all of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is what sort of relationships am I leaving myself with? If I choose not to mix with others, then what is the psychological effect on my life? We are created as social

beings, with a great capacity to communicate, fall in love and belong. But this can only happen if we are willing to encounter others. Jesus takes this a stage further by connecting our trust in the 'other' with our trust in God. As the Father says, 'Believe in the one I have sent'. To believe in Jesus, to be baptized and receive the other Sacraments, is to be in communion with God and neighbour. Baptism equals the Sacrament of Belonging.

The apostolic life of the church is brought to its beautiful climax in the celebration of the Mass, in the sharing in Holy Communion. Coming to Mass is an encounter with the Divine in the company with the human. Its life giving, it should be friendly, trusting, even loving. It should be in the company of like-minded people.

To finish, though, going back to Jonah. He didn't like pagans, unknown people, not of his religion but God wanted him to go to Ninevah even if some rejected him. The same applies to us Catholics, we don't necessarily want to encounter people who don't share our faith. But God calls us, like Jonah, to conquer our fears, to be confident of our beliefs and to challenge immorality, wrongdoing and alienation and loneliness.

The world is not changed by timid people who stand back but by brave people who step forward and break the frozen face of fear.

God Bless you All.