

Homily for the 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018

We are familiar with the scene that goes like this: “I don’t love you any more. I’m leaving you!” Many a partner in a marriage has heard those words upon waking up in the morning. With those few words years of what appeared to be a stable loving marriage comes to a bitter end. Irrespective of where blame lies the one left feels their marriage vows are betrayed. It is body blow not easily forgotten or forgiven.

Many people today feel the same kind of emotion as we live through the dreadful scandals which have plagued the Church. Where is that firm rock of Peter that Jesus promised would overcome the gates of the underworld? Many walk away from the Church at a loss their to understand, their faith shaken.

You may have heard of Charles Eugène de Foucauld. He was a French Catholic religious and priest living among the nomadic tribes in the Sahara in Algeria. He was assassinated by those he loved and served in 1916 and is considered by the Church to be a martyr. His live inspired others to live likewise and led to the founding of the “Little Brothers of Jesus”. One of those Little Brothers who lived for ten years in the Sahara as a hermit was Carlo Carretto. He wrote much about his desert experience. He died in 1988. He too struggled with the challenge to faith by the human frailty of the Church. He wrote these revealing words of the conflicting feelings he felt:

“How baffling you are, oh Church, and yet how I love you! How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! I would like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand what sanctity is. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and yet I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.” Carlo Carretto, Letters from the Desert.

He was criticised at the time for suggesting that the Church could be like that in the 1970s. But his words still ring true today. And they capture how many feel.

That kind of conflict is not new. Peter was named “Rock” by Jesus. Jesus did not take that title from him even after Peter denied him three times. Because the rock was not some personal ability or strength of Peter’s. Jesus was not describing some quality that Peter possessed. To be that rock was a grace. It found expression in the way Peter remained with Jesus when he himself failed, and even when it seemed that Jesus had failed completely by his death on the cross. Really, for Peter, there was nothing left in human terms. If ever there was a test of faith that was it. Yet, Peter remained faithful to the words of Jesus and the breaking of the bread.

In John’s Gospel we are told that at the Last Supper in the midst of his betrayal by Judas that Jesus wanted to show the depth of his love for his friends. He washed their feet and gave them the Eucharist. It is that intimate communion with Jesus Christ over and beyond any human sin and failure that Jesus offers us. We receive the Lord of life in Communion not because of any merits of our own. We are invited together, all of us, with all our failings and betrayals to stand with Jesus in the darkest moments of his life and ours. Turning again and again towards him and in union with him we can face whatever is thrown at us. As Paul says to the Ephesians, “This may be a wicked age, but your lives should redeem it.” We are a Church always in need of repentance.

It seems impossible for our small efforts to bring about a change for the future. But as Mother Teresa said, “We can never know all the good a simple smile can do”. There is always a positive way forward personally and as the disciples of the Lord.

The crowd found it very hard to hear and accept Jesus’ words as we read them today. But Peter, the rock, was able to speak up for those who remained, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

Fr Graham Gatehouse