

“Sixpence in the Slot” Priests

I don't know if amusement arcades still have any of the “Aladdin's Cave” machines that they used to have in seaside amusement arcades when I was a youngster. The glass-sided machine was full of “trinkets and treasures” and when you put your sixpence in, an elephant moved round a track into a cave and emerged with a box on its back which then tipped into a chute and inside was your sixpenny prize. Sometimes I think some people expect their priests to be like that. They put their money in the collection and all they want is for the priest to come out, “say” Mass and disappear again leaving them in peace.

There used to be a time when “hell and damnation” sermons were commonplace and there were priests who were renowned for such sermons – you've had one or two here in Whitby! They may not have made themselves very popular at the time – though I think they were respected just the same – but you couldn't really argue with what they said because by and large they were right. It was just that people didn't like to be reminded of the fact. These days we priests are fairly restricted when it comes to sermons (or ‘homilies’ as they are now called) because they are supposed to be based on the readings of the Sunday, especially the gospel. As a result, all sorts of other spiritual and pastoral subjects that really need to be addressed tend to go by the board. That's why, a couple of parishes ago, I began writing these attachments to the newsletter so people could read in their own time things I felt needed to be said because the readings didn't offer the opportunity. The alternative - to ignore the issue - would be an inexcusable failure in priestly responsibility and a disservice to you.

Though it would make for a quiet life, we are not meant to be “sixpence in the slot” priests. Apart from being ministers of the sacraments, priests are also meant to be teachers. Every year at the Chrism Mass we stand before God and our bishop to renew the commitments we made at our ordination and one of the things we are asked is: *Are you resolved to imitate Jesus Christ, the head and shepherd of the Church, by teaching the Christian faith without thinking of your own profit, solely for the well-being of the people you were sent to serve?* People may not always like a particular priest as an individual but they should at least respect his office as priest and teacher. He has been appointed by his bishop acting with the authority handed down from the apostles. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit he then carries out his ministry as priest and teacher and should never, therefore, misuse or abuse his position because he is accountable not just to his bishop, but to God. In this regard I often return to the words of Pope St Gregory the Great:

A religious leader should be careful in deciding when to remain silent and be sure to say something useful when deciding to speak... Ill-advised silence can leave people in their error, when they could have been shown where they

were wrong. Negligent religious leaders are often afraid to speak and say what needs to be said – for fear of losing favour with people.

Sadly I've watched parishioners detach these papers from their newsletters and leave them on the table unread presumably because they not only don't want to hear what I have to say, but they don't particularly want to hear *anything* that's being said because it might just have implications for their faith and they'd prefer not to know about it. Similarly it doesn't seem to matter how many times I mention things like arriving late for Mass, talking in church, taking newsletters home for information... there are some who simply take no notice and these practices continue. We have had two parish meetings this past year to discuss important matters concerning the Mass and the future of the parish and the diocese – two dozen out of over 300 registered parishioners came.

Some of these things may not seem very important in the overall scheme of things, but others certainly are and involve matters of best practice and church teaching. If people feel they can ignore the basic stuff, where does it stop? If we don't get the foundations right, then the structure we build on them is greatly at risk. In some of the older parts of the presbytery there isn't a single straight wall – and why? - because they would appear to have been built at will without any attempt to align them on a cornerstone. Our foundation, our cornerstone, has constantly to be Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Church he founded for our salvation.

One of the concerns that I have as a priest is the possible consequence for those who seem to treat Church teaching like a buffet – picking and choosing according to their personal taste. There is a story you may have heard before concerning a man clinging to his rooftop as the rain poured down and the floodwaters rose around him. He prays to God to save him but the waters continue to rise. A man in a row boat comes by and offers to help him but the man replies that he is a religious man and has every confidence that God will save him. Still the rain pours and the waters rise. A helicopter arrives on the scene but again he refuses their assistance explaining once again that he has every faith in God to save him. The waters continue to rise and eventually the man drowns. When he arrives at the Pearly Gates he asks God how come he didn't save him and God replies, 'I sent a man in a row boat and I sent a helicopter, what more did you want?'

One day we will find ourselves standing before God and being asked to give an account of ourselves and our lives. My fear is for those who may be found wanting and who will then try to offer the same excuses they used in life and God will say to them, 'But don't you remember Fr So-and-So telling you all about that? Don't you remember all those times he explained that to you?' At that point it will be too late to do anything about it. And while other people may only have to give an account to God of themselves, we priests will be accountable for how well (or

otherwise) we have served (or failed) the many thousands of people for whom God gave us spiritual and pastoral responsibility throughout our ministry and that's why we can't afford to be "sixpence in the slot" priests.

* * *

Fr Neil McNicholas