

Homilies for July (C)

Michael J. Breen

Fourteenth Sunday of the Year July 5

Is 66:10-14. Ps 65. Gal 6:14-18. Lk 10:1-12, 17-20.

Let me begin with what will seem like heresy to many. The short age of priests is not necessarily a bad thing. Around the world there is a definite crisis in vocations, with fewer priests in the Church to serve an ever larger number of Catholics. And it is a crisis, one that has been becoming more acute in the last decade. But the root meaning of the term crisis is important here - a crisis is an opportunity, properly defined as a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events is determined. In terms of our Church, the shortage of vocations to the priesthood is surely a crisis; it is not necessarily a bad thing.

Today's gospel issues an invitation to the Church in every age and every place. It is a reminder to us all that the task of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ does not just belong to a few; it is given to all believers. 'The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few.' For many years in Ireland this text was seen primarily as being about those whose vocation was to priesthood or religious life. And as a consequence much of what happened in the Church was left to those priests and religious. As one cynic put it, the only requirement for Irish Catholics was to pray, pay and obey - everything else was organised by those with a calling to the Church. The net result is that we have had a vicarious kind of religion in which the work of the Church was left to a professional grouping while the vast majority - the laity - were left outside of any mechanism of power, service, or genuine involvement.

The shortage of vocations, therefore, is possibly a good thing precisely because it challenges this way of thinking. The message is stark - there will be no viable Church in Ireland in the

future unless and until the people of the Church take responsibility for it. This is our Church, it is the work of us all. And the task of the Church, in promoting the teaching of Jesus Christ, is one that belongs rightly to us all. If we leave it to others, and fail to be involved ourselves, the Church will suffer. In many ways It already has - we have had an overly clerical Church for many years - and now, perhaps a remedy may be at hand.

But calling the crisis in vocations a good thing is clearly risky. It is quite evident that the fall-off in vocations worldwide coincides with a rise in materialism, a lessening of religious values, and an increasing individualism that cares little for those in greatest need. It could well be that what we are watching is not the rebirth of the Irish Church but the beginning of its demise, a long slow lingering death in which the Church and its values just fade away from Irish society. That is certainly the view propounded by some of our leading citizens, one of whom referred recently to Ireland as a post-Christian society.

The real end of the story is yet to be written. We do stand at a crossroads, with several possibilities before us. The real issue seems to be what kind of Church we want to have, and by extension for us believers, what kind of shape we want Irish society to have. Either we are passionately committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to extending it to the whole world, or we are not. There really is no in-between position. In this case we cannot afford the luxury of sitting on the fence. I suggest to you today that if we take the call of the gospel seriously, then we must carefully examine our vision of the Church.

Imagine what the Church might be like if every member of it took that membership seriously - a community focused on the gospel of Christ Jesus and committed to putting it into action, a place where worship of the living God was vibrant and alive, a collection of people whose love and compassion were evident for all to see, where people were given priority over possessions, where primary needs took precedence over indulgent wants, where life was lived

to the full in God's image and likeness, where challenge and possibility and growth and freedom were at the core. The real invitation of these scriptures is to dream to dream, to reflect on what a vibrant Church would look and feel like. How would our worship be different? What would it mean to be a member of such a community? What would it take? What might it cost us?

But perhaps the crucial question is a little different: do we really want a Church like that? Really? There is something very unthreatening about things as they are. Looking at a new vision raises enormous questions about challenge and commitment and involvement. It is light years away from a Church of complacency where we can come along for a few moments on a Sunday and delude ourselves that we have lived the gospel for another week.

Such a powerful vision of the Church is certainly discomfiting - it demands accountability, it provides challenge as well as care, it calls us to put our money where our mouths are, to put our time and talent and treasure at the disposal of others for the sake of the common good.

Change at a communal level will not come unless individual hearts are moved to change. It is always easy to wring our hands in despair, to talk about what things might be like if only somebody else would do something, to sit back and pick holes in every effort that is made by others. But today's gospel calls us to leave such commentary behind, to get stuck in and get our own hands dirty. The gospel issues us with a direct challenge: In what way will you share your time, your treasure, your talent, for the welfare of the Church? You are being called to be of service, you are being called to get involved, you are being called to be a bearer of the good, news of the gospel, of hope, of reconciliation, of possibility. In this coming week, whose life will be touched by your response to the gospel of Jesus Christ? What difference will you make? For the harvest is indeed great but the real labourers are so very few.

Fifteenth Sunday of the Year (July 12)

Deut 30:10-14. Ps 68. Col 1:15-20. Lk10:25-37

This is one of those gospels that we all know by rote. It has its hero and its villains; it involves conflict; there is a compelling storyline. But it has become so familiar to us that we really run a risk of not even hearing its challenge. It is as though we can go away from here with some vague intention about doing good to my neighbour, whoever that may be, without any real practical suggestions as to how best put this gospel into practice. So let me take a slightly different tack in approaching the text today.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was notorious. Its brigands were well known. Only a fool would set out on such a journey without companions for protection. To do so without second thoughts was to invite disaster. But I want to suggest to you today that the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is an allegory for any undertaking on which we might embark. Think of the various things you or I have decided to do over the years - to go to college, to change jobs, to get married, or to get ordained, or to stay single, to start a family, to move house. Whatever the undertaking, it is never without the possibility of failure - there is always the chance of falling among brigands.

In our experience, though, the falling among brigands takes different forms - it can mean debilitating illness or some other kind of setback; it can be bankruptcy or a lack of promotion prospects; it can be a lack of children or too many; it can be the prolonged illness of a parent with Alzheimer's or the death of a partner; it can be a bout of alcoholism or depression. Or it could be a whole host of things, for each one of us could write a personal list. But whatever form it takes, we inevitably come to the realization that we are not capable of managing on our own, that we do in fact need others in a variety of ways, and that the effort to spurn all

help and go solo is, in the long term, doomed to failure. As the poet put it so eloquently: 'No man is an island, sufficient unto himself.'

The journey is full of those who will either offer no help or whose help is worse than the event itself. Look at our media, for example. So often the media seem to glory in the trials and tribulations of others, often reporting what has happened in a sensational way; and then, without lifting a finger to help, move on to the next victim. How sad it is that the Irish media, particularly our tabloid press, are ever willing to diagnose the ills of society without ever suggesting a cure. And then there are those who offer all kinds of false help, who say that the solution to life's issues is to be found in a tablet or in a bottle or a lawsuit. And perhaps worst of all are those who say one answer lies in the death of the unborn. Such answers are clearly unhelpful, leading as they do only to further trauma. The hapless traveller, you or I, is left without direction, without support, without hope. And it is in this context that real help emerges. The good Samaritan is Christ himself, the one who always come to our aid in times of distress, the one who suffered himself that we might be spared, the one whose love for each of us is passionate and unconditional. There are no conditions to Christ's love, no 'ifs' or 'buts' or 'as long as' or 'until'. There is simply the profound care and compassion that is exemplified in this parable. I believe that it is here that we find the real meaning of today's gospel.

Our focus in the past has been on the imitation of the Good Samaritan. But perhaps it ought to be on imitating the traveller who fell among brigands. This poor wretch had fallen on hard times and was open to the ministrations of the Samaritan, a man he would otherwise have utterly dismissed as a worthless infidel. Maybe we can learn something from this. It is in those dreadful moments of life - of greatest darkness, of deepest despair, of total abandonment - in which God touches us. It was true of Good Friday as Christ was dying on the cross - this was the surely one of those times when the Father was closest to his Son. And

it is no different in the Good Fridays of our lives when we are most in need, for then indeed is the God who created us closest to us. Let me explain what I mean. Ten years ago my father died, unexpectedly. In the weeks and months after his death I experienced great despair. I had no sense of God being there for me or of any consolation from my faith. It was only after his first anniversary had passed that I really looked back over the year and was amazed to find that God had been there all along in those friends who travelled with me on the journey, those who spent time with me, those who let me weep, those who made time for me. It was only when my own heart was broken that I truly realised just how tangible God is in the guise of those with whom we share our lives.

We have much to learn from this parable. Clearly we need to be willing to imitate the Good Samaritan and to reach out to others even when it is inconvenient or difficult. And those others encompass all, without exception. But perhaps we also need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to acknowledge our neediness, and to be open to the presence of God through others in our lives. So let me leave you with some questions - what do you need most from God? Is it healing or affirmation or forgiveness or ...? What needs are in your life that you cannot meet for yourself? Are you open to the possibility that God will respond to your need in the most unlikely of ways? Who are your Good Samaritans?

Sixteenth Sunday of the Year (July 19)

Gen 18:1-10. Psl4. Col 1:24-28. Lk 10:38-42.

I have a very vivid memory of the first time I was called to a house where there had been a tragic death. The father of the house, a relatively young man, had died suddenly at work, leaving behind a large family with nobody else earning in the household. As I came up to the house I was running over in my mind what to say to the widow and her children - what did I have to offer that might lighten the crushing burden thrust on them so suddenly. This was not just a sad event in which death had been long awaited, a scenario I had dealt with so often before. No, this was a tragedy and utterly outside of my experience. So it was with great trepidation that I knocked on the door.

I was received with great openness. It was evident that the family were delighted to see me. The neighbours in the room drew back to let me sit close to the widow while others continued their preparations for countless cups of tea and sandwiches in the kitchen. It was evident, too, that I was being welcomed for what I represented, rather than for who I was - these were strangers to me as I was new in the parish; but I was their priest. And what a revelation that visit was! It became very obvious that I had nothing to say that could alter the grief of this family. There were no magic phrases, no ritual formulae, no 'right words.' But being there, and taking time to sit with the widow, to hold her hand, and listen to her stories of her late husband, was all that mattered. What I said was in some way irrelevant. The very fact that I was there meant a great deal.

There are many times in my own life - and possibly, I suspect, in yours - when I want to be able to fix something for another, times when I want to be able to take away the sorrow or ease the pain or simply do something in the face of tragedy or hurt or difficulty. Over the

years I have learnt again and again the message of that widow. There are many times when doing is quite irrelevant and being becomes all important.

It seems to me that it is this tension between doing and being that lies at the heart of today's gospel. On the face of it, Martha gets a rough deal. She, after all, was the one who was busy preparing something for the guests, and had been left on her own to do it. And Mary, who left all the work in the kitchen to her sister - where were the men, I wonder - was praised for her approach. Poor Martha. Little wonder that our sympathy lies with her - as St Teresa put it, if Martha had behaved like Mary, Jesus would have gone hungry. So what did Jesus mean? And what relevance does his teaching have for us today?

One way of looking at this gospel text is to ask, 'whose needs were being met?' Who was Martha serving? She certainly wanted to minister to Christ, that is clearly evident by her willingness to provide him with food and drink and to go to some trouble in doing so. But perhaps the real issue is not so much what Martha wanted to do for Christ but what Christ wanted or needed from Martha. Food would certainly have been welcome but it was not the greatest priority in his life at that time. He wanted her to take time simply to be with him, to be present to him. Here again is that tension between doing and being - Martha wanted to do something for Christ and Christ simply needed her to be with him.

So often in our lives we make the same mistake. We ask what we can do for God or for others. And so we go to Mass, we do novenas and pilgrimages, we fast and do penance, we send Mass cards to the bereaved, we attend funerals, we donate to charity, we respond to appeals, and a host of other things for the sake of the gospel. But it can be so easy to overlook the alternative questions - what does God want of me? What does my neighbour need from me?

The answer may well lie in the simple issue of time. Perhaps what is required most of me is a willingness to waste my time generously with and for others. Such splurging of time requires great generosity on our part for it is something we can never recover. But it sends a very profound message. When I spent time with that widow, I felt quite useless; I had thought it would have been so much better - and easier - to have been in the kitchen washing dishes and preparing food. But being with her and allowing her space to talk and giving her a much needed ear said something about caring that is often lacking in our world. Being with her was a way of saying she was important enough to have my full and undivided attention. So much so that anything else could wait. There are so many people in our world who need to hear that message, who need to know that they matter in some real sense, that they are more than charity cases making demands on our cheque-books, or that their grief can be assuaged by the sending of a Mass card. Perhaps, then, the real questions that today's gospel addresses to you and me are simply these: to whom will we be present in this coming week? For whom will we splurge our time in a generous and unstinting fashion? Who will come to know of God's unconditional love through our willingness to stop and listen and simply be?

Seventeenth Sunday of the Year (July 26)

Gen 18:20-32. Ps 137. Col 2:12-14. Lk 11:1-13.

There is an old story told of St. Benedict travelling on a long journey by horseback and meeting a beggar along the road. The beggar recognized Benedict and sneered at him, 'Isn't it a fine thing to be a man of prayer and to own a horse as well?' Benedict, being a man of the gospel, replied, 'My friend, if you can say the Lord's Prayer without getting distracted, I will make you a present of the horse.' The beggar could hardly believe his luck and so he immediately began, 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread ...' and then he paused, looked up at Benedict and asked, 'Does that include the saddle and the bridle as well?'

This prayer is the gift of Christ to his disciples who wanted to know how to pray. In essence they had asked, 'How do you pray?' and this was Christ's response. It has been at the heart of Christian prayer ever since the time of Christ and it serves as the pattern of all prayer. It focuses first on the worship due to God and only then on the needs of the community. But it is a prayer that we have heard so often and used so frequently that there is a genuine risk of its becoming a meaningless babble of the kind that Jesus warned against.

Today, then, I want to focus on the notion of the Lord's Prayer as the primary prayer of the Christian community. Its opening is quite specific - it is addressed to the Father, a prayer to the God who formed us, the mysterious presence who is unnameable and hidden and yet available. It is the form of words Christ taught us with three emphases. It is the prayer of praise to God; it is the prayer that acknowledges our common need spoken from the depths of our shared humanity; it is the prayer that states our faith, hope and longing for the unity that Christ desired. A word on each.

First, the prayer of praise to God. The Lord's Prayer is focused on the creator. While that seems to be stating the obvious we need to remember that this is the purpose of prayer - prayer is not about my needs or wants, although those are clearly part and parcel of it. I pray because of my faith in who God is, the one who created me, the one who sustains me, the one who loves me with an unending and unyielding passion, the one to whom I belong and to whom I will go at the end of my life. As I come to pray I start with worship of my creator, acknowledging our differing roles. I do not come before God as an equal, nor do I come as a slave - I come as one rejoicing in the life-giving relationship I enjoy in faith before God.

This faith, then, is so central to my life that each time I pray I am asking that God's vision for our world would become a reality, that God's power and truth and justice would reign supreme on earth, that God's values would permeate human society, that the nations of the earth would become so God-centred in terms of attitudes and values that earth would be indistinguishable from heaven. That is what it means to pray for the coming of the Kingdom. Moreover such a prayer indicates a willingness on my part to become part of that process of making earth more like heaven in whatever way I can.

Second, it is an acknowledgment of common need. Such need is quite different from personal want. I want to win the lottery, I want to be famous, I want to be powerful. But what do I need? What do we need as a community? The Lord's Prayer suggests three things - bread, forgiveness, and safety - in other words sufficient nourishment for my body, healing for my relationships, and freedom to become all that God desires I should be. These are not individual needs - they are communal - and in this prayer I am asking for them to be met for us all. And by implication, I am stating that I am willing to work to ensure they are indeed met for everyone, without exception. In today's terms this surely challenges those who believe that personal wealth can be justified in the face of overwhelming poverty in parts of our world.

Finally, the Lord's Prayer faces me into the notion of unity in the Church. The whole prayer is in the plural, suggesting a corporate dimension to our faith lives. It indicates that there is no such thing as an individual believer, that we are in this process together, that without one another we cannot survive as believers. But it suggests too that faith is something that overcomes all our divisions, that is greater than any differences that exist between us. So when I come to pray the Lord's Prayer, I join hands with saints and sinners, with priests and prostitutes, with architects and addicts ... knowing that before God all of us have fallen short, and that we cannot afford to point the finger at anyone. This prayer reminds me above all else that our Church is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints - and it is only in unity with my broken sisters and brothers that I can truly come to find healing for myself.

In a few moments we will pray the Lord's Prayer together as we prepare to share in the Body and Blood of Christ. Perhaps then our focus should be on ourselves as members of this community, who have in common our sinfulness and our faith and our redemption.

Throughout this coming week, let us try to be aware of that for which we have prayed - that earth might become like heaven, that the basic needs of people everywhere might be met, and that we are called to a common unity of purpose by our faith. In what way will this faith be the focus of your life in the days to come? What will you do this coming week to make these hopes a reality? How will you live the Lord's Prayer?

Today. For every priest, in every age, the greatest task is each day to discover his own priestly 'today' in the 'today' of Christ to which the Letter to the Hebrews refers. This 'today' of Christ is immersed in the whole of history - in the past and future of the world, of every human being and of every priest. 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Heb 13:8). If we immerse our human and priestly 'today' in the 'today' of Jesus Christ, there is no danger that we will become out-of-date, belonging to 'yesterday'. Christ is the measure of every age. In his divine, human, and priestly 'today', the conflict between 'traditionalism' and 'progressivism' - once so hotly debated finds its ultimate resolution,

- POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Gift and Mystery* (Doubleday/Catholic Truth Society) p. 84