

5th Sunday Lent (C)

- I am reminded of the story of a bishop in South America who severely criticised rigid priests in his diocese who had refused to baptise the child of an unmarried woman - he called them hypocrites, praised the young woman who had carried the baby to term, & lamented the fact that she had had to wander from one presbytery to another for the baptism of her child.
- That bishop acted in total harmony with today's gospel & he was elected as Pope several years later - that gives me hope for the Church of the future.
- Jesus' method is pastoral – caring & sensitive & this is the way we are to be as his followers – embracing those in the world who are easily rejected.
- The prayer of today's Mass beautifully captures the longing of the Church for the world; It is described as a prayer for the courage to embrace the world in the name of Christ, & it reads:
- *'Father in heaven, the love of your Son led him to accept the suffering of the cross that we whose humanity he shared might glory in new life. Change our selfishness into self-giving. Help us to embrace the world you have given us, that we may transform the darkness of its pain into the life & joy of Easter.'*
- 'Help us to embrace the world' - This needs courage, because it is a lot easier to stand back &, from a safe distance, criticise the false values condoned or encouraged by others.
- Of course there is a place for criticism; our personal experience, however, is that criticism is helpful only when it comes from love.
- This is because when someone doesn't love us we know that they don't understand us, & so we tend to defend ourselves against criticism which appears unjust; it is the same in the public arena.
- When people criticise without love, those who are criticised will defend themselves against the criticism which they see as unenlightened.
- When this happens nothing good is achieved.
- Christians who act in this way are not following Jesus whose command was to love one another - If we love, we may well be in a position to criticise.
- If we do not love, we had better be silent.
- Jesus knew that his Father loves the world & it is this conviction that shines through the gospel of last Sunday's mass where we see the Father rushing out to the younger son who had thrown away his inheritance in extravagant living & who was returning home destitute.
- The father ran to him & kissed him, so delighted was he to have his son home again, safe & sound.
- It was this astonishing love that made it possible for the younger son to respond, to be reconciled with his father & to celebrate his home-coming.
- Jesus knew that his Father loves the world.
- Jesus continued to embrace the world that he might transform into joy the darkness of its pain.
- He forgave his enemies, he welcomed the repentant thief into paradise, & from his passion & death on the cross, he poured out love to give life to us.

- He called his disciples to do the same when he commissioned them to go out to the ends of the earth to preach the same good news which he had preached: the good news that God is love & that he is constantly gracing everyone to turn from the destructiveness of sin, to believe that they are loved, & so to discover in their hearts a capacity to respond in love, to God & to others.
- Our most precious gift as human beings is the certainty that we are loved by God & constantly upheld & inspired by his gracious & grace-giving Spirit.
- This is our contribution as Christians to our brothers & sisters who are working for a more human world, even if they begin from purely humanistic principles.
- The opening words of the declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Church in the modern world said: *'The joys & the hopes, the griefs & the anxieties of the men & women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these are the joys & hopes, the griefs & anxieties of the followers of Christ.* (G&S 1).
- In the same document, the Council went on to declare: *'The Church believes she can contribute greatly towards making the family of humanity & its history more human. We are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man & woman are defined first of all by their responsibility towards each other & towards history. Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the people of the modern world ever more generously & effectively.'*
- There are other examples of how we, while claiming to be Christians, & sometimes in the name of our faith, have ostracised certain groups, made people feel anything but welcome among us.
- Some of these attitudes can be explained by earlier prevailing ignorance.
- But today's prayer reminds us to keep looking at our attitudes & praying for the courage to love – the courage to embrace the world in its pain & messiness.
- The world needs a change of heart in many areas; only an embrace such as that given by the father to his prodigal son will bring about this desired change.
- The Pharisees in today's gospel were right to condemn adultery.
- They were wrong to condemn the adulterous woman.
- It was Jesus by his love & not they by their condemnation who changed the woman's life.
- Jesus did not condone her action; He calls it sin & tells her to 'go & sin no more'; He changed her because he loved her & refused to condemn her.
- Next time we find ourselves criticising anyone, could we ask ourselves 2 questions?
- Firstly do I know this person? Do I really know him or her?
- If I don't, then there may be a place for criticising what he or she is doing, but there is no place for criticising the person.
- And the second question is: If I know this person do I love him or her.
- If I do, then perhaps there is a place for criticism born of love.
- If not, then let silence guard my tongue lest I only harden the position I am aiming to correct & thus contribute to the harm which I seek to oppose.