

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time
(Genesis 3:8-15/Mark 3:20-35)
10.06.2018

In today's gospel passage we see how at a certain point even the family of Jesus didn't know what to make out of Him. All kinds of questions seem to have been running through their heads. The Scribes had their minds made up. They were saying: *He is possessed by a demon*. Jesus' loved ones wouldn't have gone that far – probably since they knew first hand Jesus' goodness – but they were clearly worried about Him; they questioned His mental health, they thought He was disturbed and needed to be saved from Himself. The extraordinary thing is that what led to the Scribes' affirmation and Jesus' family's worry was the good Jesus was accomplishing. The crowds were coming to Jesus for healing and He was having a salutary effect upon them. It was the positive impact of Jesus' ministry that sowed suspicion in the hearts of those who looked on. With the Scribes' reaction to Jesus we are brought to the crux of the matter. Here we are led to what stands at the heart of so many of our own difficulties today – just as it has done for so many over the centuries. What we see played out in today's gospel scene is little different to what we read in the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis. This confirms me in my opinion that the first three chapters of Genesis provide us with nothing short of a key to understanding the whole of biblical revelation. Much of what we see going on in today's gospel passage is better understood when we keep the story of humanity's fall in mind. So much of the confusion we see in the gospel account read today stems back to the insights we are given in the crucial passage found in Genesis 3.

In today's first reading we heard how *the Serpent* presented God to be nothing short of a liar – a being obsessed with His divine privilege. Nothing could be further from the truth! Nonetheless, our first parents bought into this lie and many of us are foolish enough to still follow suit. The bad fruit which God declared to be a source of death is presented by *the Serpent* (whom tradition refers to as *the evil one, the great deceiver, the liar, the perverter of truth*) as *good to eat*. What we have here is a classic example of a figure of darkness robed in light – portraying itself to be good, kind, considerate and concerned for others. Satan's ruse prevails. Very quickly our first parents began to see the bad fruit just as Satan presented it to them: as *beautiful to see, good to eat, desirable to attain intelligence*. In their foolishness humans have bought into the deceiver's first lie in successive generations. This has been the great drama of humanity in every age – including our own: suspicion around and disdain for what is good and right, coupled with a fascination by what is bad and wrong. How readily we pursue what is harmful and ultimately destructive – both self-destructive and destructive of others. So many of the dehumanising attractions we give into are presented to us as the right thing to do, the more truly humanising course of action to follow! Just think of the way in which the arguments around the recent referendum in the Republic of Ireland were presented by some people who participated in that debate. There were those who played the card that termination of pregnancy is the best human, the more humane, way to follow in most cases. Is it really? I am not at all sure that all those who have undergone that trauma would so readily agree with this. I have met women who have suffered such terrible loss and this is not the feeling they have retained from their experience. They have come through deeply wounded, carrying scars for years afterwards, longing for healing and what some have called *the restoration of their human dignity*.

At the very heart of so much human error and sin, so many of the well-intentioned, but fundamental mistakes we make in life, is what might be considered a good desire: the longing *to be like God*. This desire is perverted at the root, however, by the one who sowed it in the hearts of Adam and Eve. The longing *the evil one* awoke within our first parents was not the desire to be as God *truly* is, but as Satan presented the Lord to be. Think about it... The Serpent presented God to our first parents as a deceiver – one who had lied to them to safeguard His own privilege, someone working to His own ends and not their genuine well-being. When we consider the text, we see that it is only

after Satan had attributed lies to God that he encouraged Adam and Eve to aspire to be as God is: *You shall be like Him*. Is that really what our first parents wanted for themselves? Did they truly want to be like a lying God? Surely that would make them people of deception. Who would want to resemble a being unworthy of trust? It seems this is what Adam and Eve were completely tricked into becoming deceitful beings themselves. What is called *the sin against the Holy Spirit* in today's gospel text is rooted in the initial great lie of the tempter. *The sin against the Holy Spirit* is a perversion of the truth; it is the presentation of what is good as evil and what is evil as good. Because of this fundamental confusion havoc has been wrought in our world in successive generations – havoc which is rife in our own day and age.

The call I hear addressed to us this morning is a call to set aside the lies we have foolishly adhered to. It is also a call to come out of that place of hiding into which we have retreated and in which we risk losing ourselves completely. Having gone into hiding and fled even ourselves, many of us have become quite lost and live our lives caught up in the lie of self-deception! Wanting to deceive ourselves we prefer to hide from the truth – even what we know to be true about ourselves. This explains why so many of us take refuge in pretence. We pretend to be other than we are because we are ashamed of who we really are. We are embarrassed by our own nudity and so we try to cover our nakedness. This is hardly surprising. You see, we all feel vulnerable, weak and exposed when naked. With a sense of *inner nakedness* we feel not only covered in shame, but inhabited by it. For this reason, more than any other, so many of us *play-act*. We become *hypocritical*. The word *hypocrite* describes *a person who pretends to have virtues or qualities he or she doesn't really possess*. Hiding our shame by hypocrisy we condemn ourselves to live a lie – and as a result can end up living a double life. Moreover, wanting to defend ourselves from every/any accusation of wrong-doing, we will frequently start to blame others (anyone will do) for our inappropriate behaviour. Very quickly, the good and innocent will be scapegoated as a result. People as good as Jesus will be pointed to and designated as the real culprits of wrong; the innocent can find themselves deemed responsible for the ills and woes of our world. When Adam was questioned notice how he blamed the woman for his problem. He even backhandedly blamed God by reminding the Lord that He had given him the woman as a companion in the first place. Effectively, what Adam said to God amounted to this: *What happened wasn't my fault, it was Eve's... and she was Your fault, so the real culprit and villain in the story is You, Lord*. In her turn, Eve blamed the Serpent for the ill that befell both Adam and herself. Ever since, *passing the buck* has become a standard reaction of wounded humanity when it is confronted by its own guilt and shame. The way to healing and recovery from this debilitating ill is nothing other than this: for each one of us to accept our personal responsibility for *what we have done and what we have failed to do*. The only way forward for us is to stop play-acting, to set hypocrisy aside, to give up on pretence. Liberation comes with our daring to come out of hiding, ceasing to try to mask and cover up our guilt and hide our shame. We can use all kinds of ploys and resort to all sorts of methods in our efforts to do this. We try so hard to be – at least to appear to be – someone other than the person we truly are. At times, people will have recourse to a substance addiction or some other compulsive behaviour in their bid to escape reality. At other times, the attitude taken up by those suffering from *toxic shame* will be a stance of self-righteousness – they will adapt an intransigent, rigid approach to all things... and not least to religion. People who give into this latter disorder are prone to setting themselves up as paragons of virtue, presenting themselves as men and women who are superior to most other poor mortals. Fairly frequently it happens that the two opposite ways of acting out that I have just described will meet in the same person, leading these people to live in total contradiction with themselves in a kind of schizophrenic way. How often people of good repute – supposedly morally superior beings, men and women who pretend to be one step above everybody else by their good behaviour – have been/are/will be exposed as less than honourable in their ways, shown up as part fraudsters and even complete phonies.

God's call to come out of hiding is addressed not only to our far distant ancestors, Adam and Eve, but to all of us. The Lord calls us out of those places in which we have taken false refuge. He calls us out of our hiding not in order to humiliate us, not in order to disgrace us by exposing our vulnerability in a way that would do us harm, but in order to liberate us, to free us from those ills which are only perpetuated by cover-up.

So much unhealthy cover-up has been brought out into the open in regard to Church life and that of the State in various jurisdictions. However painful all this has been, however difficult it may be for some of us to recognise this to have been necessary, such exposure is actually salutary and beneficial. There are wounds that need to be exposed to the light – because the light carries healing in its rays. There are wounds that have to be aired if the sufferer is to be restored to new life. What is kept wrapped up, hastily bandaged over, because it is unsightly, can so easily become foul and fester. The Lord wants us to learn from all that we see happening at a communal level for the well-being of our personal lives. For our personal benefit it is good for us to be called out of hiding – to *come clean*, as it were. You may remember a text found in Matthew's gospel where Jesus is depicted to have confronted the Pharisees of His day with these words: *Hypocrites! You are so careful to polish the outside of the cup, but inside is foul with extortion and greed...First, cleanse the inside of the cup and then the whole cup will be clean.* Let's dare to hear those words for ourselves. Let's take them as our cue to honestly deal with what we need to deal with in our lives. The cleansing required of us may sometimes lead to the shedding of tears in humble recognition of our misery, sorrow and pain. Those tears can be so good for us. They can prove to be not only what cleanses us, but also precisely what heals us. To be bathed, soaked, in tears can be akin to descent into a healing stream – nothing short of the equivalent of being plunged into waters of rebirth. Saying that, words from the *Orthodox Rite of the Blessing of the Waters* come to mind. The priest prays:

*Make these waters a fountain of immortality
A gift of cleansing
A remission of sins
A healing of compulsive habits
A destroying of demons
A renewing of our God-given nature.*

At this time when we might be feeling that things have run dry for us as Church, I believe it is important for us to hear the prophet's invitation calling out to us, saying: *Dig up ancient wells.* What the prophet invites us to do by those words is exactly what we need to be doing as Church at this time: turning to the God-given sources of renewal available to us which are to be found in our *ancient heritage*. We must return to the vigorous life we once had as Church on this island which in *the dark ages* was hailed as *The Isle of Saints*. We must remember the grace of our personal *ancient heritage*: our baptism. The call addressed to us at the present time is nothing other than God's call to holiness. As Pope Francis reminded us recently in his Apostolic Letter *Gaudete et Exsultate: Let the grace of your Baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness. Let everything be open to God; turn to Him in every situation. Do not be dismayed, for the power of the Holy Spirit enables you to do this, and holiness, in the end, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life.* One place where we can all go to *dig up ancient wells* – a place we all need to go to if we are to do that – is to descend into the depths of our own hearts and there engage ourselves in authentic personal prayer. In his Rule for Monks St Benedict reminds us that the authenticity of our personal prayer will most often be verified by an awareness of our own weakness and a confession of our sin and this will lead us to shed *tears of compunction*. May the tears we are led to cry in the prayer of helplessness cleanse and restore us, purify and heal us; may they bring us to experience that new birth for which we long and which will be God's gift to us as we call out to Him from our place of misery and distress. Let me return to and end with Pope Francis' encouraging message in *Gaudete et Exsultate: When you feel the temptation to dwell on your own weakness, raise your eyes to Christ Crucified and say: 'Lord, I am a poor sinner, but You can work the miracle of making me a little better'.*