

3rd Sunday of the Year (C)
(Nehemiah 8:2-6.8-10 / Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21)
24.01.2016
Formation & Proclamation

Because we have been anointed by the Holy Spirit, as we strive to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, we are called to “bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight”.

How can we do that? Is it possible for us to accomplish such a mission?

These questions do not concern only those who are engaged in a discernment process about their vocation in life. Even if there is a one-off aspect to these essential questions for those discerning their vocational path, it is true to say that they apply for all of us every day since our Christian identity is something we build up continually.

In our daily lives for example, how do we reconcile our allegiance to a political party and the demands of the Gospel and our duty to bring the good news to the poor? When we have to make a financial decision, are we driven only by self-interest and competition? When we meet new people, men and women from other races, cultures or religions, are we moved by a spirit of liberty and new sight or by one of fear and judgement?

The challenge is quite unavoidable because we cannot claim to be Christians and Catholics and decide to create Gospel-free compartments in our lives. Christ should be proclaimed, made visible in all that we do and say.

Today our readings from the book of Nehemiah and from the Gospel of Luke, with their emphasis on teaching and understanding, invite us to reflect on what we say about our faith, on how we nourish it so that it may grow in knowledge and understanding.

Recently a group of women, accompanied by a priest from their parish, came to the Monastery. All these women were very involved in the life of their community, with responsibilities in liturgy and catechism.

At one stage one of them explained to us that she believed that Adam and Eve had really existed as persons, and she quoted many verses from the New Testament where Adam is mentioned. I said to her that it was a difficult position to hold and that the official teaching of the Catholic Church was more nuanced than what she was saying. For his part, the priest said: “It is fine for you to believe that, as long as you live as a good Catholic”. He was certainly moved by good intentions and yet was it really the most appropriate thing to say?

It seems to me that, in our world, we cannot expect the Good News to have an impact on people’s lives if we do not speak in a way which respects their intelligence.

With the Spirit as our guide and our light, as Christians, laity and clerics, we have something to say about politics, science, sociology, sexuality, economics, about the real lives of real people. However we have to speak in a balanced, respectful and informed way.

A few weeks ago a Catholic man said to me: “Gay people who have sexual relationships go to hell”. This statement was supposed to reflect his Catholic identity. I had to say to him that whatever was his opinion on homosexuality, he seemed to be more informed than the Catholic Church on the subject. In truth, the Church does not know who is in hell.

All our words and statements matter. We have to be very careful when we decide to speak in the name of the Church, or simply as Catholics. The truth and the credibility of the Gospel are at stake.

We are not all called to become scholars or to be specialist when it comes to very complexed moral or theological questions. Yet, we are all expected to say something about

our faith. Religious education at school and a few years of theology in a seminary are not enough, we all have the responsibility and the duty to learn about our faith, to deepen it, and to keep it up to date with contemporary debates and questions.

The fact is that, if we want the principles of the Gospel to permeate our society at all levels, we must speak a language that is understood by all. If we want to evangelise our brothers and sisters in humanity we must enter into dialogue with them, in a constructive, mature and well-informed way.

And again, this challenge does not concern only missionaries in far off lands. All of us in our daily decisions and meetings are supposed to speak in the name of the Church, to proclaim the Good News. In our families and communities we must be ready to give an account of the hope and the faith that are in us (cf. 1P 3:15).

Addressing bishops, Pope Francis declared: “Formation is an essential element in the development of the People of God (...). Their formation must be solid and ongoing.” (Address to the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, 06.09.2014)

Formation is certainly the greatest need in the Catholic Church in Ireland. The goal is not only to help people to think but also to pray, to discern and to relate to others in ways which are in conformity with the Gospel. This responsibility is laid on the shoulders of each one of us.

The driving force for us should be the desire to serve the Lord and his Church faithfully and fruitfully. This requires of us maturity in faith and consistency in the way we live our Christian lives.