

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Ezekiel 2:2-5 / Mark 6:1-6)

08.07.2018

Scandal

In our Gospel reading, we were told that “most of the people in the synagogue were astonished.”

*Astonished* is certainly an understatement! The Greek verb is *scandalon* which has given the English verb *to scandalise*. The first meaning of this Greek verb is *to make stumble, to make fall*.

So the people in the synagogue were not only astonished, they were scandalised, they stumbled. Here we see that the words from Isaiah quoted by St Paul are true: “I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall” (8:14 in Rom 9:33).

Jesus is a source of scandal not only because of his death and resurrection as St Paul suggests in his letter to the Corinthians (1Co 1:23), but because his whole life and teaching are challenging and unsettling to whatever is narrow, self-centred and greedy in humanity.

Today it would be fair to say that Jesus is no longer a source of scandal for unbelievers. Most of them simply ignore him.

However what we cannot ignore is that the Church has become a stumbling-block for many today. Scandals of all kinds whether they are about money or sex scandalise believers and unbelievers alike. One of the consequences of this situation is that we are inclined to focus our attention on the Church, on the institution. We enter into a defensive mode and spend a lot of our time and energy dealing with ecclesiastical questions. These questions are important, insofar as we remember that the Church is a sacrament of Christ. In all that we do in the Church, our focus should be on Christ.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is quite clear: “Christ is the light of humanity; (...) the article of faith about the Church depends entirely on the articles concerning Christ Jesus. The Church has no other light than Christ’s; according to a favourite image of the Church Fathers, the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun” (n. 748).

If the Church is like a mirror which should reflect the light of Christ, when there is a scandal in the Church, a stain on the mirror, then it becomes more and more difficult for the Church to reflect properly the light of Christ.

Christ is the door (Jn 10:7), the Shepherd (Jn 10:11), the corner stone (Mt 21:42) and a stumbling-block, a cause of scandal. Yet while it is in his nature for Christ to be a source of scandal, this is not how it is for the Church. When Christ is a cause of scandal, it is in order to prevent us from conforming to the world, from being complacent and self-satisfied. It is a wake-up call to remind us that we cannot settle in our old ways and think that we have everything right and in order.

When the Church is a cause of scandal, it is because of its sins and because we have lost our focus and forgotten what our mission is: to reflect Christ and him alone. Most of all I think that the Church becomes a stumbling-block when we, priests and lay people, do not keep our eyes fixed on Christ.

The good news is that God is able to use everything for our good. Even the scandals in the Church can become an opportunity for us to grow in truth, in authenticity and in depth. However we have to be careful because we can miss the opportunity. We may be caught up in our desire to keep up appearances, our pride may hinder us from journeying from feeling

humiliated to being humble. We may end up clinging to a very superficial relationship with Christ.

There is another aspect to the problem: it is possible for us to become too accustomed to Christ, we tame him and neutralise his ability to challenge us. Like a stone that we polish over and over again, we making Christ and his Gospel smooth and easy to hold and manipulate. Christ and his Gospel have lost their power of astonishment. Unlike the people in the synagogue, who were scandalised when they heard Jesus, I am not sure that today we really hear him, and truly listen to him. We are no longer touched by what we hear in Church Sunday after Sunday, the words we hear can fall like water off a duck's back.

Our Sunday Eucharistic celebration is not meant first to be a "lovely Mass" as some would say. Yes it is important that things are done beautifully, but more than that our celebration should challenge all the scandals that we nurse in our hearts, families and Churches: scandals when we refuse to forgive and to care for the poor, scandals when we use our power and authority for self-promotion, scandals when we use the Sacred Scriptures in order to justify homophobia or the inhumane treatment of migrants.

We celebrate the Sacrament of unity while we are divided Churches, we celebrate the Sacrament of peace while our hearts and countries are at war, we celebrate the Sacrament of life while so many children, women and men are dying of hunger. Our celebration should bring to light all the scandals that we would much prefer to ignore or keep in the dark.

Together we should leave our celebration with a renewed awareness of what is amiss in our lives, what the Lord expects from us and what we are called to do in order to make things more conformed to the Gospel. If this was so, then that would be the sign that our celebration has accomplished its prophetic mission.