

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Jeremiah 23:1-6 / Mark 6:30-34)

18.07.2021

*Mater & Magistra*

Today the last line of our Gospel reading informs us that Jesus “began to teach the crowd many things.” In St Mark’s Gospel, we are often told that Jesus set about teaching and yet, most of the time, the evangelist does not share with us what Jesus precisely taught.

What St Mark tells us, at the very beginning of his Gospel, is that the people “were astounded at Jesus’ teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” (1:22)

Why is Jesus’ teaching so different from the teaching of the scribes?

The first essential element that distinguishes Jesus’ teaching and makes it so special is his listening attitude. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. (...) Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by him who is himself the great listener (...). We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.” (*Life...*, p. 75-76) This divine listening attitude defines Jesus’ teaching in a radical way. During his 30 hidden years in Nazareth Jesus listened to and pondered the words, the expectations and disappointments of those around him. He learnt from them what it meant to be a human being. This explains why St John tells us that “he could tell what human beings have in them.” (Jn 2:24)

Jesus’ teaching is rooted in his experience of encounter with others, in his desire and ability to listen to what is in their heart. His knowledge and wisdom do not come from books but from his love. It is this which gives him the ability to know what really matters for us, and to discern the one thing absolutely necessary (cf. Lk 10:41-42) for each one of us.

A second aspect that makes Jesus’ teaching particularly eloquent is that it is not only about words.

When the crowd were amazed at Jesus’ teaching ministry, they not only asked themselves: “What is this wisdom that has been given to him?” but they added: “What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” (Mk 6:2) Jesus came to speak to our minds and hearts, to renew the way we think and behave. Everything in Jesus’ life is a teaching. When Peter wants to sum up Jesus’ mission, he says: “He went about doing good and healing all.” (Ac 10:38) In his words and deeds, Jesus teaches us who we are and shows us the way to become more and more who we are called to be.

Jesus’ teaching is radically different from that of the scribes and Pharisees because it brings life, it gives birth to new life in us, it opens up new doors and new horizons for us.

All that I have said up until now is not without consequences for the Church and for each one of us. If the Church is *mater et magistra*, mother and teacher, each one of us, in different ways and in communion with each other, are called to teach and to bring life to all by our witness.

Like Jesus, compassion must move us to act and speak for the good of those we meet. Like Jesus we must feel deep within ourselves that the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of our fellow men and women are ours (cf. *GS* n. 1) so that our teaching maybe be real and welcomed.

The Church cannot exercise her teaching ministry if she does not first listen to the men and women of our time. Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, the Church must meet our contemporaries where they are, listen to them and journey with them.

Teaching is a process. The Church's teaching mission implies that she accompanies us in our growth. St Paul complained about the Corinthians who were not mature enough in their faith and whom he had to feed "with milk, not solid food." (1Co 3:2) And the author of the letter to the Hebrews does not mince his words when he writes: "You have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God." (Heb 5:11-12)

Too often grown-up Christians are unable to respond properly to the challenges of adult life because they have not been given the tools they need, because they still function, pray and think in the same way as they did when they were twelve. The Church is *mater et magistra* when, through her teaching, she helps us to grow "to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." (Eph 3:14)

We are not all called to be doctors in theology but we are all called to always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have (cf. 1P 3:15). The answer required does not have to be a long theological statement, but above all the witness of a life lived according to the Gospel, faithful to authentic Catholic tradition.

From this point of view, the Synod of the Catholic Church in Ireland will provide all of us with an opportunity to grow in faith. All of us, lay people and clergy, need to be taught anew by the Spirit, renewed in the understanding of our faith, so that we may become adult Christians, able to dialogue with the world, better informed and spiritually equipped for the good fight (cf. 2Tim 4:7).

On the webpage dedicated to the Synod, the bishops speak a lot, and rightly, about walking together and listening to one another. Yet the Synod should not be – cannot be – a stroll in idyllic surroundings engaged in pleasant chat. The present situation of the Catholic Church and society in Ireland requires a Synod in which we will deal with the real issues; we need to commit ourselves to truthful dialogue and reflect upon the necessary changes that will allow the whole people of God to proclaim Christ and to teach everyone in all wisdom so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ (cf. Col 1:28).