



SUNDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 2020

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

The Parishes of: Bishop Auckland || Newton Aycliffe & Shildon || Willington
Crook, Tow Law & Wolsingham || Tudhoe || Coundon, Ferryhill & Windlestone

ESCOMB PARTNERSHIP NOTE

26th Sunday of the Year (A): Matthew 21: 28-32

I watched the news as a TV reporter was inviting the views of a man in the street. I forgot what the issue was for which he was seeking a comment. But the man launched a very fluent attack on politicians, spin doctors, purveyors of fake news and a lot of the scaremongering material allowed by some of the internet providers. It was strong stuff.

The episode came to mind when thinking about today's Gospel. We have Jesus talking to the chief priests and elders of the people. Incidentally, always check who is the audience when Jesus is speaking - its very important. He chooses to pose a scenario in which the truthfulness of what people say is questionable when considered against the follow-up. Political promises that go nowhere are easy targets and serious too, but some of our Church statements, especially those in cumbersome language could end up easily forgotten or discarded too.

How about you and I? We put our hopes and intentions into words that fade quickly sometimes - good if, like one of the sons in today's Gospel, we can come back and do something about what may have been ill-considered agreements or denials. Jesus puts it to the leaders of his time that their dismissive attitudes to John the Baptist and to his effect on ordinary folks, was a threat to themselves and their power. They were intent on their position, influence and image rather than being open to the message of God's witnesses. They seemed unwilling to change their minds.

The use of words and images is hugely important. They carry subtle and unsubtle messages aimed to influence behaviour, allegiance, spending habits and a whole lot more. In this, the Word of God has a clear priority but it can be put to one side as inconvenient (like the first son in the story) but we may come round to it later. Convenience and expediency can easily result in making excuses that lack honesty. Without trust much of ordinary life is not possible. This Gospel touches our integrity and invites careful thought.

The man interviewed in the street was frankly despairing of honest communication in a society peppered with soundbites and slogans fashioned to convince but simplifying of complex issues requiring serious and mature thought.

The Word of the Lord is a well-known phrase to us. We may wish to unpack what it means, who is speaking, and what importance we choose to give it. If I can fool myself, I will. Being honest begins with ourselves. No pretending.



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ESCOMB PARTNERSHIP NOTE

A new letter from Pope Francis

“Fratelli tutti” is the title Pope Francis has chosen for his new encyclical - dedicated to ‘fraternity’ and ‘social friendship’. The first words of the new ‘circular letter’ (this is the meaning of the word ‘encyclical’) come from the great Saint of Assisi, whose name Pope Francis chose. The title in no way intends to exclude women, more than half of the human race.

On the contrary, Francis chose the words of the Saint of Assisi to initiate a reflection on something he cares about very deeply; namely, fraternity and social friendship. He therefore addresses all his sisters and brothers, all men and women who populate the earth.

We live in a time marked by war, poverty, migration, climate change, economic crises, pandemic. Recognising a brother or sister in everyone we meet and, for Christians, recognising the face of Jesus in the other who suffers - these responses reaffirm the irreducible dignity of every human person created in the image of God. They also remind us that no one can ever emerge from the present hardships alone, one against the other, the global North against the global South, the rich against the poor or any other excluding differentiation.

On 27 March, at the height of the pandemic, Pope Francis prayed for the salvation of all in an empty Saint Peter's Square, in the pouring rain, accompanied only by the sorrowful gaze of the Crucifix of St Marcellus and the loving gaze of Mary, Salus Populi Romani, protector, health or salvation of the Roman People.

“In this storm”, Pope Francis said, “the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters”. The central theme of the upcoming papal letter is “blessed is our common belonging”, which indeed makes us brothers and sisters.

Fraternity and social friendship point to what unites men and women; a necessary affection established between people even if not close blood relatives. The relationship must be expressed through kind deeds, forms of assistance, works of justice and generous action in times of need - a disinterested affection towards other human beings, regardless of any difference or affiliation. For this reason, all readers should be able to understand the title Fratelli tutti with the absolutely inclusive connotation that is intended.

The Pope will sign the letter on the tomb of St Francis on 3 October.