

**Sermon preached at the Annual Festival of the Society of the Maintenance of the Faith in St Augustine's, Kilburn. 27.09.08**

***If anyone wants to boast let him boast about the Lord.* (From 1 Corinthians – the First Reading today!)**

**“Terrible times, Father, terrible times”. These words were uttered on my front door step by a beggar in Glasgow. Indeed for him they were terrible times – no work, no home, no one to love him. When I think of him and I think of the way we get into such states about the Church, I feel rather humbled. Whatever goes on in the Church we still have God – things may be a bit messed up according to tradition, but God is still God – a God who loves us and**

**comes among us. We could do well never to lose sight of that.**

**I remember another Glasgow beggar who came to my door obviously imagining from the state of my dress that I was a Roman Catholic. He made large signs of the Cross and said, “I ken the signs, Father, I ken the signs”. This now reminds me of my school days when I tried to catholicise all my Episcopalian friends. The signs that they had “arrived” and were proper Catholics were not only making the sign of the cross but also receiving Holy Communion fasting and on the tongue – never into the hand – and going to Confession. I would still like to think that Catholics would go to confession although I have to confess a great reduction in my frequency of doing so – perhaps**

**it just means I'm less neurotic. In those now far off school days, I judged priests by important things like the greeting before the gospel. You could always tell whether they were proper Catholics or not if they realised that it was incorrect to extend the hands for that greeting because they were at that point being a Deacon. And you could certainly tell those who had not read Fotescue regarding the correct use of the biretta. I suppose I should have mine on to preach!**

**Since Fr Conrad asked me to this occasion I have been mulling over what I think now to be important and worth maintaining. What are the hallmarks of true Christian Catholic faith? What are the flowerings of belief in a God who creates us, comes among us,**

**embraces, dies for us and reveals the resurrection by rising to new life?**

**All around us there are tests of secular orthodoxy based on issues of morality as judged by the press, political dogma, especially political correctness. Our views on feminism, gay issues, war, euthanasia and so on categorise us in the worlds eyes. But what views or approaches demonstrate the Faith we wish to maintain.**

**The question isn't a simple one: On the one hand, it asks the question of essentials: What's essential and what's negotiable in the teachings of Jesus? But it asks, as well, whether there is there any one thing in the teachings of Jesus and the Church that can serve as a defining criterion as to what makes one uniquely Christian and Catholic?**

**I have to begin with the acknowledgement and acceptance of God's love. At the time of Jesus' death the veil of the temple was torn in two opening up the holiest of holies. Without us doing anything the love of the holy one is there for us. The first Christian hallmark, it seems to me, is to go on and on seeking to accept and acknowledge that love. You are loved! As we begin to do this we are called to respond with our love. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments", said Jesus. So responding to God's love in Christ with our poor love becomes another part of the hallmark.**

**There seems to be a mandate from Jesus that makes social justice non-negotiable, not optional, within Christian discipleship. This is clear**

**from Jesus' own life, from the text on the last judgement in St Matthew's Gospel. Today we are celebrating St Vincent de Paul who is in some way the icon of social justice. In his forties, having been chaplain to an aristocratic French family, he was set free to be what God wanted and his encounter with Louise de Marrillac led to the founding of the Sisters of Charity. He was worried about the ignorance of clergy and people alike about their faith and formed a company of mission priests. He told the Sisters of Charity that there would be no trace of artificiality or humbug in their service of the needy as long as they saw and loved the Lord himself in the person they were helping. He was indeed a forerunner of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It is more**

**difficult for us today in some ways with state benefits and slick relief organisations and yet the example of St Vincent and the imperative of Jesus make seeking social justice a great hallmark of true Catholic faith. Yet another hallmark must be belonging to the Church. We cannot be a Christian on our own – we cannot love God in a vacuum. We are asked to journey to God with each other. Worshipping and praying together and pondering the things of God and joining in the healing of the world mean that the Church is no optional extra. The Church exists also to ensure the sacraments. That is why vast concern arises in changing the matter of the apostolic ministry and part of the Society's work will be to seek and work to maintain that**

**ministry. The Sacramental life has always seemed very important to me. I think that apart from certain holiday times when I have been in strange places I have hardly missed a day without at least being at Mass since I was confirmed. Is this obsessive behaviour? I have just returned from Dundee where there were about six Episcopal churches which in my youth had a daily Mass. Now it is fairly difficult to find any – even the most “Catholic” parish has reduced in that way. This is a purely personal gripe – but perhaps a pointer to the need to maintain a dependence on God through the worshipping life of the Church.**

**Finally, what Jesus asks of us as an essential component of disciplined faith is a mellow, warm, grateful**

**heart. Discipleship isn't just about what we do; it's also about the spirit within which we do it. We need the right truth, but also the right energy. Nothing counts for much, no matter how right or orthodox the action, if it doesn't issue from love and gratitude. No action rooted in bitterness, anger, jealousy, self-righteousness, or in a desire for revenge can ever justify itself in Jesus' name.**

**Thus these things - private integrity, social justice, involvement in ecclesial community, and mellowness of heart - are the hallmarks or the flowerings of the faith we profess. But there's still a further question: Is there any one, singular, teaching that can serve as a criterion as to who is practising the faith and who is not. There is. For**

**Jesus, the test for a disciple, at least for a mature disciple, is this: Can you love an enemy? Can you bless someone who curses you? Can you forgive, and can you forgive even a murderer?**

**It is precisely to this challenge that Jesus refers when he tells us that our virtue must go deeper than the virtue of the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees were, for the most part, sincere and decent people who loved God, tried to help the poor, were concerned about truth and morals, and practised justice. But loving an enemy and forgiving a murderer aren't prescribed by justice, the ten commandments, church dogma, human decency, or even sincerity. They're an invitation to something**

**deeper, an invitation that comes from Jesus' life and teaching, and an invitation that, in the end, constitutes the litmus test of mature discipleship.**

**So, be maintained by the faith and maintain the faith. God is faithful. Are we?**