

Homily for the 4th and 5th Sundays of Ordinary Time in Year B

28th January and 5th February 2024

My brothers and sisters in Christ,

Whether we are in Year A, B or C, the Second Reading on each of the Green Sundays between the end of the Christmas Season and the beginning of Lent will always be taken from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In fact, over the whole of the three year Sunday cycle, we effectively read the Letter in its entirety. So it is worth asking what it is about this Letter that justifies such careful attention. What are we supposed to be learning from it? The answer, I suggest, is that the Church in Corinth is typical of every Christian Community throughout the ages. Their challenges are our challenges; in fact so alike are we today in 2024 to the infant Church of the first century AD that we could just easily call this letter, St Paul's First Letter to the Brummies and it would still make perfect sense.

You see, like Birmingham, Corinth was a large city at a key interchange in the country. We are at the heart of a motorway network with a massively busy central rail and bus station; Corinth was a major trading port connect by road and sea. Birmingham is a multicultural and diverse city and so was Corinth. Numerous languages were spoken in Corinth as they are in this city. If you think things can get a bit wild on Broad Street at the weekend, you should try down town Corinth where every temptation was catered for if you had enough money.

Into this unpromising soil a seed was planted: it grew up to become the Church in Corinth to whom St Paul wrote his letters. However, that growth was not achieved without growing pains. The Church in Corinth had to come to grips with the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel to those who did not wish to listen, because thought they knew it all. The Corinthians had to learn what it meant to live as Temples of the Holy Spirit in an environment where virtuous living was laughed at. How were they to form themselves to show the

power and presence of Christ in their lives? They had to regulate their worship and sacramental life so that the truth of the Gospel was fully expressed. They were called upon to be charitable in their social outreach in a society which idolised the power of money. Evangelisation; formation; worship and sacramental life; charity and social outreach: these were the four cornerstones of the mission to which the Corinthians eventually committed themselves. They are the cornerstones of our mission too. It is no surprise that these very same building blocks form the foundation of our Diocesan Vision here in Birmingham: evangelisation; formation; worship and sacramental life; charity and social outreach. Just as the Corinthians protected and nurtured their mission in challenging circumstances, so must we.

Archbishop Bernard outlined the Diocesan Vision in his pastoral letter of June 2021 as we were all coming back to Church from the pandemic. It remains our guiding light even if the plan we need to get us there has to respond to new developments. A crucial fact which none of us has the power to avoid is that within 7 years 43% of all active priests in the Archdiocese will have reached the retirement age of 75. What we do have the power to do, however, is to shape the way we respond to that unavoidable fact.

When I say "we" I am referring to three key decision-makers. The first of these decision-makers is the Archbishop himself. He alone has the responsibility of deciding whether to merge several parishes into one to create a larger worshipping community. My friends, we need to prepare over the next three years or so for the very strong probability that within 5 years the three parishes which form our cluster will be merged into one single parish under one parish priest. We may have an assistant priest

as well and God willing we shall have at least two if not three permanent deacons: but one parish under one parish priest is the overwhelming likelihood.

The second decision-maker, then is the parish priest – whether it be a priest of the Ordinariate like Fr. Simon or a priest belonging exclusively to the Archdiocese like Fr. Thé. Whoever is the parish priest of any newly-merged parish will have to rethink how he goes about his ministry. He will have to work out what is absolutely essential for him as parish priest to do and do only that. The rest must be delegated to the permanent deacons and the lay faithful.

Which brings us to the decision-maker with perhaps the biggest challenge of all us –lay faithful and permanent deacons alike. We are going to have to get used to a new way of being Catholic- one which does not depend upon everything being referred to Father and Father making all the decisions. I am not just talking here about taking over the management of the buildings – vitally important though that is. What I am primarily talking about here is accepting the challenge of living ever more consciously as temples of the Holy Spirit, just as the Corinthians did; the challenge of becoming ever more intentionally the building blocks of an expanded worshipping community.

With that in mind, let's go back to the four cornerstones of the Diocesan Vision.

Evangelisation: we will need whole teams of lay people to befriend families who present their children for baptism and accompany them both before and after the celebration of the sacrament.

Formation: we need to continue to develop lay ministers to prepare people for the sacraments and lead services of worship that are not Mass where a permanent deacon cannot be present. Notice- I said “people” and not “men”. We most certainly are not giving up on praying for vocations to the priesthood but we are

recognising that even an answer to that prayer will not produce a priest in the short term.

Worship and sacramental life: a key dimension to our collective worship is linking those who cannot get to Mass to Holy Sacrifice by taking Holy Communion to their homes. We will need to expand considerably the current group of lay people who undertake this important ministry.

Charity and Social Outreach: by tradition this has always been classic “lay territory”. We will always need this aspect of parish life. Studies show that people must first feel that they belong to a community as a social reality. Then they develop their beliefs through their ever-growing nurture from that community. Finally, they grow closer to Christ on their pilgrimage of faith as they seek to conform their behaviour to their beliefs. Belonging; believing; behaving. That was precisely the pattern St Paul adopted in his First Letter to the Corinthians. He strengthened the community by eliminating discrimination. He taught them about the faith and then he showed the fledgling Church how to live in the way God had called them to live.

Two final points. First, our focus throughout the next few years must be on the mission and how we reorganise ourselves to carry it out. The prospect of radical change is unsettling but the next few years are also a time of great opportunity. Secondly, nobody is talking about closing buildings and permanently altering the times of Masses immediately. In this Year of Prayer the best way we can spend 2024 is by getting to know one another as prayer partners and by getting to know one another on a social level. Look out for announcements about that in coming weeks. A number of events have been planned for Lent and Easter leading to a General Meeting of the Cluster in the Summer. In conclusion, be full of hope. Jesus Christ is Lord. His power will be sufficient for us all. The Christ who speaks with authority, casts out devils and performs miracles of healing can certainly lead us through this period of change. Nothing is impossible with God. To Him be glory and praise for ever and ever. Amen!