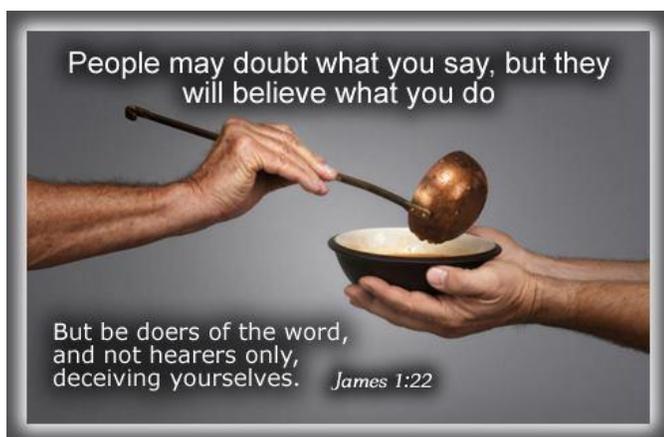


Homily for August 29, 2021 – 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time



I suppose if we were like many Protestant churches and had a sign outside advertising the title of this Sunday's sermon, it would probably read: ***Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*** That is a direct quote from the second reading, from the Letter of St. James. The deception, James is referring to, is that we deceive ourselves into thinking that we can live the Christian life without any inner conversion. If we hear the word of God, and think that's good enough,

without any deep conversion of our hearts, our attitudes, and ultimately our actions, we are only deceiving ourselves. St. James goes on to say, that if you come upon a brother or sister who is poorly dressed or hungry and you simply say, ***"Keep warm and eat plenty,"*** what good is that? If we are not moved to action, conversion has yet to take place in our hearts, and we remain only hearers of the word.

In his encyclical called *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis strongly encourages us, in the face of global environmental change, to be doers and not merely hearers of the word. Here is a concept that may be new to you as it is to me: Ecological conversion. Let's break it down. "Ecological" comes from the word "ecology" which is a branch of biology dealing with the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment. Conversion means a turn around, a change of mind and heart, and not simply a minor tweaking. This change of mind and heart leads to a change in behavior. So, when we talk about ecological conversion we are talking about a change in how we look at our environment, how we interact with our environment, and how we care for the ultimate environment, the earth itself.

If we become ecologically converted people, we do so not because David Suzuki told us to, nor do we do it because it's fashionable to be a tree hugger. We do it because our faith in God calls us to on-going conversion. We do not do it simply because we love the planet; we do it because we love God, the One who gave us the beauty of this planet in the first place. We are told in the creation story from Genesis that everything was first put in place, and then humans were created to be stewards of that creation, not its masters. Environmentalists, for the most part, have been a real gift to the world. They have challenged us with good, sound science in the hopes that we can save our common home and restore it to its former beauty for future generations. But Christian faith, which predates the environmental movement by about 1900 years, asks even more of us. It asks for a conversion of not just mind but mind and heart.

The heart is much more than an organ that pumps blood and keeps us alive. The heart is the seat of passion, desire, love, beauty, the drive for justice, truth, and mercy. Without the heart, we remain in the head, and never move forward into the world of action. It's the heart that stirs us to action. It is from within, from the heart--as Jesus reminds us today--that greed, also comes. The heart, as much as the mind, needs conversion.

Pope Francis reminds us in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, that with the decline in biodiversity, the extinction of species and the degradation of land, sea, and air the poor have often paid the highest price. When we exploit our environment, it becomes just that much easier to exploit the poor. It is usually on the backs of the poor--the voiceless ones who have to remain voiceless in order to keep the meagre job that they have-- that I enjoy much of the material world that I do. Greed, unrestrained consumerism, and our insistence on our personal rights, over and against the common good, makes ecological conversion almost impossible. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, at the end of the day, are the same cry.

A secular approach to the world looks at the world from the outside and asks, "What can I still get out of this world, in the remaining time I have? What elusive thing, probably from Amazon, will finally make me happy?" With that approach, I'm at the center of the universe and everything is here for my gratification. It's every man and every woman for themselves. However, from a Judeo-Christian point of view, I do not stand on the outside looking in. I stand within the world conscious of the bonds which God has linked us to all beings. Even the birds of the air and the grass of the field, as Jesus tells us, are not forgotten by God. If they are not forgotten by God, what do they want to tell me about what is essential in life? What can I live with a little less of, so that future generations can benefit equally from the Earth's resources? If we can learn to live more conscientious of the poor in our midst and with a deeper respect for the harmony built into all creation, then perhaps people will say of us, ***"What a wise and discerning people!"***

When we live a life of integrity, our inner beliefs are integrated with our actions in the world. In that world of integrity, we find the courage to consider: how we treat one another, our consumer habits, how we vote, and how we care for our common home--the earth. When we do not live a life of integrity, we live the opposite--hypocrisy. Hypocrites don't care about others; they care only about looking good in the eyes of the world. Wherever Jesus saw people violating the dignity of human life, he called those people who were doing the violating--hypocrites. ***"You hypocrites,"*** he says in today's gospel, ***"you honour me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me."***

As I get older, the gospels seem to be speaking to me, and about me, more and more. There is no watering it down. When I try to water it down and resist every invitation to live a more integrated life, a more authentic life, I know in that moment my pious thoughts have become

a convenient substitute for washing feet. The outer garment, my persona—who I want you to think I am—is rarely taken off. And the towel of service is rarely put on.

Consider this. Every sacrament has substitutes. If you cannot, through no fault of your own, be baptized with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the Church has something called “baptism of desire.” If you cannot, through no fault of your own, receive Communion, the Church has something called “spiritual communion.” If you cannot participate, through no fault of your own, in the sacrament of reconciliation, the Church has something called “perfect contrition.” But here is the rub. While there are substitutes for the sacraments, there is no substitute for the love of neighbour. If you are on the way to the altar, to express your love for God through a fitting offering, but realize your brother/sister has something against you, first go and be reconciled with your brother/sister, and then offer your gift.

The prophets of old have all said this in one form or another: ***“The quality of your faith will be judged by the quality of justice in the land; and the quality of justice in the land will be judged by how the weakest and most vulnerable groups in society fared while you were alive.”*** The whole idea was that our standing with God depends on our standing with the poor.

There is no substitution for love of neighbour, and there is no salvation without love of neighbour. Fr. Ron Rolheiser says: ***“Nobody gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”*** And that is why we must be doers of the word and not just hearers.

Fr. Phil Mulligan