



28th Week of the Year and Mission Reflection: Mgr Daniel McHugh

“The Catholic Church must respond more strongly to people’s search for God”
(Cardinal Sarah)

This past Sunday evening my “year” group who started the journey to priesthood together in Rome in 1961 gathered for our periodic get-together here in Solihull. We were not short of topics for conversation: the Synod is underway in Rome; the Israel-Gaza war had begun; the invasion of Ukraine by Russia continues; and the LGBT debate gathers pace inside and outside the Church. We are all now 80 plus and share the problem of remembering names occasionally! I was wise enough to include insurance against last-minute cancellations at Travelodge: fortunately, because 4 of the group of 9 had to cancel due to health issues; one had a very bad chest infection, another’s wife was very unwell (we didn’t all become priests but we still gather as the 1961 entry in Rome); one’s brother had a heart attack, and finally one – a priest – decided the long journey from South Wales would be unwise.

As has been our custom, one of us gives a Reflection to the rest of the group at Mass on Monday morning. This, for me, turned out to be very stimulating to further thought. He spoke about the symbolism of the Oar Tree in the life of Odysseus from Greek Mythology. I can’t expect everyone who reads my Reflection to be familiar with Greek Myths, but if you have reached 70 or 80 years of age you will know that you have reached a stage in life where you are looking towards the final quarter of the match (thinking of Rugby anyway!). Odysseus had spent many years at sea and was thinking of returning home and planting an oar in the ground signifying the final end of his journey (a lot like the Americans planted a flag on the moon as one commentator has said). The planting of the Oar was a perfect conclusion of this chapter of Odysseus’s life and the start of something new. In Homer’s *Odyssey* the Oar had a winnowing shovel at the other end: the symbol of something new. So the Winnowing Oar: a symbol of closure with the oar planted in the ground and the past mistakes put aside, and yet the start of something new.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Chaff comes to mind from Matthew 3. One of the advantages of growing older is learning from experience: being able to distinguish what is good grain from what is chaff, when considering our Christian journey; being more able to consider what our priorities should be.

The Parable at the centre of this Sunday’s Gospel is the Wedding Banquet; Jesus’ listeners would have been familiar with the image of a wedding feast as a symbol of God’s salvation, and they would have considered themselves to be invited guests. The context of the Parable is the growing tension between Jesus and the Jewish Religious Leaders – to their mind they should have the best seats at the Banquet, but Jesus

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intimates that they are going to be sidelined for the Gentiles because they reject Him and His teaching. The Alleluia verse for the 28th Sunday sums it up:

Alleluia, alleluia!

The Word was made flesh and lived among us; to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God

Alleluia

(John 1:12)

Cardinal Robert Sarah is one of those who has concerns about the Synod process. He fears anything that might detract from the central concern of the Church saying *“The Catholic Church must respond more strongly to people’s search for God. What really matters is our eternal life, our life in friendship with God”*. This comes from a man whose love for the Church and her mission is so evident. So, let us pray for Pope Francis and the Synod that Sarah’s voice is heard too. The Church is first of all about the good news of the Kingdom – that priority must be always borne in mind.

Returning to my “year” meeting: we could all remember the Day the Second Vatican Council began under Pope St John XXIII 11 October 1962. It was an exciting time for young students hearing the news emerging from the daily sessions of their Council Fathers. We thank God for the Pope who opened the windows of the Church to the modern world. The Church has to continue to speak to the issues of our day while proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. As an “elder” these days I love these words of Pope St John XXIII:

“Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do”. (Thanks to Fr Peter Reilly for this post on Facebook).

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