

Seventeenth Sunday: Year A
Holy Ghost & St. Stephen, Shepherd's Bush

26 July 2020

(1 Kgs. 3:5, 7-12; Rom. 8:28-30; Mt. 13:44-52)

'Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the Kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both old and new.'

John XXIII was one of the most loveable and gentle of popes. But he was nobody's fool. Asked how many people worked in the Vatican, he paused and replied: 'On a good day ... about half.' Already pushing 77 when he became Pope, people assumed he was just a caretaker. In 1959 he surprised everyone by calling an ecumenical council. The idea came to him as an inspiration in a flash.

A generation ago people divided on whether or not they were 'Vatican II' Catholics. That was wrong. We are all Catholics; Vatican II is part of our shared tradition. Today, many Catholics have never heard of the Second Vatican Council. An ecumenical council is a meeting of all the Catholic bishops in the world. It was the 'Vatican' Council because it met at St. Peter's in Rome. It was the 'Second' Vatican Council because the last council had met in the same place 90 years earlier.

This is important because people have such different views about Vatican II. It is important because it concerns a fundamental question: how can I be a disciple of Jesus Christ today? How can I be faithful to the constant teaching of Jesus and His Church? Or do things need changing? If so, how do you change things in the Church?

Like Solomon, we need 'a discerning judgment' and 'a wise heart. John XXIII had both. It's worth reading his opening address to the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudet mater Ecclesia*, 'Mother Church rejoices.' The Pope was clear what he wanted the Council to achieve. He didn't want a talking shop. He wanted 'to diffuse the light of truth; to give right guidance to ... individuals and ... society.' Whether it concerns marriage or the Mass or the Church, Christ's truth is unchanging. It can't be otherwise. He is God; He doesn't make mistakes or change His mind. And He holds all generations to be equal. He doesn't say one standard is good for our grandparents, but a lesser standard applies today. God's love and His truth are for all people for all

time. The Pope quoted Jesus: ‘He who hears you, hears Me.’¹ When we hear the Church speaking at the most solemn level today, we hear Jesus.

So did the Second Vatican Council change anything? The Pope was insistent. Catholic truth is a great treasure, but the Church’s job is ‘not just to guard this treasure, as though it were some museum piece and we the curators.’ The truth is to be celebrated and shared because it is not book knowledge. It is about a relationship of love with Jesus Christ Himself. If people can’t understand the language and the presentation, then we are failing to bring them into relationship with God, to help them discover meaning and purpose in life. That is both sad and damaging.

Did John XXIII want change? Of course he did. He spelled out what that consisted of: ‘What is needed at the present time is a *new enthusiasm*, a *new joy* and serenity of mind in the unreserved acceptance by all of the Christian faith.’ He wanted the teaching of Jesus and His Church to be ‘more widely known, more deeply understood, and more penetrating in its effects on our moral lives.’

The challenge is the same today. We must be creative in getting the Gospel message out there. We cannot afford business as usual – if that’s clearly not working. But when it comes to the substance, the easy option is to dismiss Jesus’s teaching as ‘old-fashioned’ – because it requires me to change. But Jesus loves us and asks us to conform ourselves to Him – for our good and the good of others.

We are called to make new disciples today. Knowing himself to be loved by God, the Pope loved God in turn. He wanted us all to become more Christ-like. Vatican II wants to make us new, taking us back to the sources, to the Church Fathers and to Scripture, and therefore to Jesus Himself.

St. John XXIII was canonised by Pope Francis because he was ‘like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both old and new.’

¹ Lk. 10:16