



16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

‘Teaching in the wilderness’

As I thought about today’s Gospel reading over the last couple of days or so, an irony struck me; not a very serious one, but it made me pause. What struck me was the first Gospel after the end, not just of the term, but of the whole academic year, should be about Jesus teaching the people at some length or, as some have translated it, he taught them ‘many things.’

It has been a long and, in many ways, difficult term. Not only did we have swine flu which forced the school to close, but we had an OFSTED inspection as well. Now don’t get me onto the subject of OFSTED: they are not my favourite people at the moment and, if I am not to lose all Christian charity, I shall forbear to say more. Needless to say, it was a difficult inspection, but it has made me reflect on teaching, what is good teaching, what is the purpose of teaching, how do we teach?

And so we come back to the Gospel and what do we find? Jesus, the teacher. Unfortunately, we don’t know how he would have fared under the watchful eye of an OFSTED inspector, because Mark’s Gospel doesn’t give us his lesson plan. If you look this passage up in the bible, you will find that Mark just says that Jesus taught them, but it doesn’t say what exactly it was that he taught. There is, it seems a glaring gap.

But what is clear is this: the people that he taught were hungry and lost. They looked to Jesus and they saw in him someone who could give them what they needed. So much so that they were prepared to follow him into the wilderness, into a desert place. Now we know that deserts are not good places to be: they are hot, they are rocky or sandy, they are dry, they are infertile, they are hostile. And yet it is out here, where the people are hungriest, thirstiest, most lost, that they encounter Jesus, who is moved with compassion. He sees their hunger, he sees their thirst, and he reaches and teaches them.

So why is Mark silent on what it is that Jesus actually has to say?

Because Jesus is teaching them about who he is. He is giving them spiritual nourishment. He is giving them himself. If I look back on some of the best teachers I ever had, I primarily remember their generosity. Good teachers not only impart knowledge, they throw their heart and their soul into what they are teaching. They give of their time, they take trouble, they go the extra mile to help, especially those who are struggling. Good teachers know their subject, but they also know their students; good teachers love their subject, and they also try to love their students. In other words, good teachers don’t just give knowledge: they give of themselves.

How much more true is this of Jesus: he, the good shepherd, knows his sheep, loves his sheep, lays down his life for the sheep. His whole life, his whole being, who he is: that is the lesson. And it is the lesson that the people need to learn, the spiritual hunger that needs to be fed. And here in the heart of the hostile, hot and hungry desert, they find what they need.

And, if you need any further clue, you need look no further than to what happens next. Jesus feeds them. Five loaves and two fish suffice to feed five thousand so fully that twelve baskets of scraps are collected.

Jesus has taught them the simple lesson that he is what they need, that he is the answer to the most important questions. Are they hungry? He is the living bread come down from heaven. Are they thirsty? He is the spring of water, welling up to eternal life. Are they lost in the wilderness? He is the way. Are they confused by the complications of their lives? He is the truth. Are they fearful of the future? He is the life.

Above all, he is teaching us about us. He is telling us about ourselves, about what we could and should be. Good teaching not only informs and educates: it transforms hearts and minds, it kindles hope, it gives energy, it excites, it makes things possible. The teaching of Jesus raises our hearts and minds towards heaven: it is the Good News that we are loved by God and called to see him face to face.

That is the lesson that we relearn every time we gather here as we listen to the word of God and receive Jesus in Holy Communion. So, today, let us take in once again the lesson that Jesus teaches us. But don't just learn it. Live it. We are what we eat. We are the Body of Christ and we are called to be teachers ourselves. We have learned. Let us go out and teach.