

Homily - Launch of 'Walking Together' - Plymouth Cathedral,
17th October 2021

Many will have heard of the 19th century thinker Friedrich Nietzsche. In many ways he is the father of modern atheism. One of his most famous works became a slogan for those who do not believe as they acclaim "God is dead". What is less known about him is that Nietzsche spoke often of the importance of finding a home. At one point in his life Nietzsche gave expression to this as he imagined himself on the road home. In his mind's eye as he walked the road, he imagined being able to see his childhood home. From a distance he saw the light on in the kitchen. He even imagined being able to picture the clock ticking on the wall. And he imagined too, being greeted and embraced by his father.

How important home is for us. How we all long for a place to call home where we are secure, where we can rest. Today we launch in the Diocese this Synodal journey. This journey where we recognise that we walk together. We too long to be at home. To be secure, to find a place of rest and of safety. Ultimately that will come for us when we find our place in the Father's House. Will be embraced by Him in an eternal face to face. Unlike Nietzsche we do not walk this road alone. Other people on the road are our brothers and sisters. We are here to help one another walk this road together to the Father's house.

And so, we encounter one another along the Way. We meet one another face to face. The One who teaches us how to do this well, is the Lord Himself. We hear in the Gospel, of what happens to those who walk the road of life. It takes place on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus,

"As the two disciples talked and discussed these things with each other Jesus Himself came up and walked along with them...."

The Lord walks with us! How often we forget this fundamental truth of being a disciple. The Lord does not stand aloof. He is completely present to them. He is open to encounter. Nothing leaves Jesus indifferent; everything is of concern to him. Encountering faces, meeting

eyes, sharing each person's history. That is the closeness that Jesus embodies. He knows that someone's life can be changed by a single encounter. The Gospel is full of such encounters with Christ, encounters that uplift and bring healing. Jesus did not hurry along or keep looking at his watch to get things over. He was always at the service of the person he was with, listening to what he or she had to say.

As we start this process in the Diocese, we too are called to become experts in the art of encounter. We do so, not so much by organizing events or theorizing about problems, or planning strategies for pastoral reorganisation, but in taking time to encounter the Lord and one another. Time to devote to prayer and to adoration – that form of prayer that we so often neglect – devoting time to adoration, and to hearing what the Spirit wants to say to us individually and to the Church. Time to look others in the eye and listen to what they have to say, to build rapport, to be sensitive to the questions of our sisters and brothers, to let ourselves be enriched by the variety of charisms, vocations, and ministries. Does not St Paul remind us in that letter to the Corinthians of the great variety that there is:

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them”.

There is so much richness in our diocese which we need to be open to encountering and receiving, such diversity but all united together in the power of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus.

This willingness to encounter one another and to encounter the Lord among us, requires an active listening on our part. Jesus listened fully to the disciples' experience, to their story, and their questions. He listens with his heart and not just with his ears. He reminds them of the Scripture and breaks that open for them. We know that in doing so their hearts are set aflame.

We must ask ourselves, “Are we good at listening?” Do we allow people the space to express themselves, to walk in faith with us, even though they have had difficulties in life? Do we allow them to be part of this

walking together with the community without being hindered, rejected or judged?"

Participating in this process of walking together means placing ourselves on the same path as the Word made flesh. It means following in his footsteps, listening to His Word along with the words of others. It means discovering, as the disciples did on the day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit always surprises us.

I recognise this can be a slow and perhaps tiring exercise. It may even feel a little boring - learning to listen to one another – bishops, priests, religious and laity, all the baptized – specially to avoid artificial, shallow or knee-jerk responses. Yet the Holy Spirit asks us to listen to the questions, concerns of all, within the Church. And to listen to the world, to the challenges and changes that it sets before us. It requires much patience and perseverance on our part but let us truly seek to listen to one another.

There is one thing I want to highlight. That is that encountering and listening are not ends in themselves. As they pause on the road at Emmaus, the disciples are brought to recognise the reality of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist. It is a foretaste of the eternal banquet when they will truly be at home. They recognise Him in the breaking of bread. They experience here and now the home that they can have in the Risen Lord through the power of His Spirit.

Here is a valuable lesson also for us. It is especially important in this country where "synod" can so often be misunderstood or misinterpreted. This Synodal path, this walking together, is a process of spiritual and ecclesial discernment. It unfolds in adoration, in prayer and in dialogue with the word of God, and in experiencing the Risen Lord in the Breaking of Bread. So, this process is not some kind of big consultation or Church convention. It is not a study group, a democratic political process or parliament. It is a grace-filled event, a process of healing to bring us home. It is very important that we remember this.

This “walking together” is guided by the Holy Spirit and prayer to the Holy Spirit must be an integral part of the journey.

Jesus in the power of His Spirit wants us to help one another along the road, to find our home in Him, and to find new ways, new models, new pathways which will help us to reach out, to invite others in our world to join us on the road. For the Lord desires so very deeply that they too find their home in Him. We are called to be the instruments of that. May the Holy Spirit help us to encounter one another, to listen deeply to one another, to show us the direction the Spirit wants us to travel, so that we can be more effective witnesses of Jesus to those who do not know Him.

+Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth