

Easter 5C

Tolstoy tells the story of a man who stopped to give alms to a beggar. To his dismay he found that he had left his money at home. Stammering his explanation, he said, 'I'm sorry, brother, but I have nothing.' Never mind said the beggar the word 'brother' means more to me than money.

According to catholic teaching, the Church is first and foremost about people, not a physical building and the first reading today emphasises this point – It said, "when Paul and Barnabas arrived at Antioch, they assembled the Church i.e. the people and gave an account of how God had used them to open the door of faith to the unbelievers". God can also use us, if we let him, to strengthen each other's faith be they part of the church community or even far removed from it.

When the retired Pope Benedict was launching the year of faith in 2013 he wrote: "the door of faith (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, inviting us into a life of deeper communion with God. But this should result in a deeper communion with each other in the church. We can't separate communion with God from being part of the People of God within the church. The two go together.

I was at a talk last week in the pastoral centre given by an American priest on how to make the church more appealing to people especially to those who have stopped coming to Mass. He said not only must we love Jesus but also love His church. When people say they believe in God but not the Church they're missing the point. That's like saying I believe in royalty but not in the monarchy. Without the Church, for a start, there would be no Mass or sacraments. These are the principal means by which divine life is dispensed to our souls. If Christ didn't think the Church was important, then he wouldn't have founded it. It's as simple as that.

Our job as church people is to allow the door of our personal faith to open wide so that, like Paul and Barnabas, we can draw new people into the Church community in order that their lives may be shaped by the saving words of the gospel and strengthened by the Eucharist and the other sacraments.

When Paul and Barnabas assembled the Church in Antioch they set about giving an account of all God had done through them. Here we see Christ and His church working in tandem. The Church is described as an extension of the presence of Christ into the world. As church members He gives us the honour of being His associates, furthering that extension.

The church doesn't exist for its own sake in order to build up its power base on Earth, but it exists as God's instrument in furthering His Kingdom of Love in this world. The only way we are going to come across as genuine church people is by our love for one another as the gospel today relates. That's doesn't mean we won't fail at times in carrying out this mandate but we never give up trying. As a community of believers we're there for everyone, saint and sinner alike. Our credibility as a church rests on it.