

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 'bricks and mortar'. 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, firstly to strengthen each other's faith in the church community and secondly to make us more credible disciples of Christ to people outside the visible church.

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 it should at the same time lead to a deeper communion with each other in the church community. We can't separate communion with God from communion with the People of God. They go hand in hand.

I was at a talk some time ago 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 in 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. This is the cement which binds the community together. Without the Mass it would be like building a house without concrete. It easily collapses. 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 Christian lives may be shaped by the saving words of the gospel and bear fruit in good works by receiving the Eucharist.

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 in the world. As church members He gives us the honour of being His collaborators in furthering his kingdom. It's a divine human partnership. You can't be a genuine Christian on your own, 'ploughing a lone furrow'.

The church doesn't exist for its own sake in order to build up a power base in the world, but it exists as God's instrument in furthering His Kingdom of Love in this world. Love is the cement which binds the church community together. Our credibility as the People of God rests on it.