

2 September 2018, 9.15 a.m. | 22nd Sunday of the Year (B)
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 | Psalm 15 | James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27 |
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

TEST EVERYTHING

As we come to celebrate the Eucharist this morning, let us pray to our heavenly Father that our faith may be purified, so that we do not emphasise the non-essential, but really come to the core message of the Christian faith. Sometimes, we can get lost in trivialities. Let us pray that our faith may be deepened and purified.

My dear sisters and brothers, in today's gospel, Jesus seems to belittle the teaching of elders. We have always been taught: 'Honour your father and mother; listen to the elders; follow the teaching of the elders'. And yet, Jesus seems to be critical about the traditions and teachings of the elders. Is Jesus destabilising the system?

St. Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5), says very clearly, 'Test everything'. **Test everything.** 'Discern everything'. 'Hold fast firmly to all that is right'. Test everything. Don't leave out anything from your discernment, and after you have tested, hold firmly to what is right. You can discard the rest.

I think Jesus is giving us a very important teaching for our lives and for our faith. I'd like to refer back to a time in history when the Church was going through a very dark period in the Middle Ages. We have all heard of Martin Luther, who was born in 1483. Martin Luther was born Catholic. He even became an Augustinian monk and served in a monastery. Martin Luther looked at the Church and found that there was corruption, and he began to become critical about the way the Church was functioning.

There were two things that really destabilised the Church at that time. One was a natural phenomenon of a sickness called the plague. Millions of people in Europe died because of this disease. People were afraid of death. Most of them lived in poverty. That was one aspect of life in that period.

The second factor was that the teachings in the Church were inaccurate. The priests themselves were 'half-baked', so to speak. If a person wanted to become a priest, there was no seminary formation like we have today – eight years, ten years. They attached themselves to a parish priest, and the parish priest would teach that young man whatever he could teach. But since the priest himself was not trained, he couldn't train another person. There was no college like we have the St. Pius X College in Goregaon, where people could study and be trained before becoming priests.

And so, there was rampant ignorance about the faith. The people became very gullible, very naive about their beliefs, and unfortunately, the elders also, priests and bishops included, misguided the people. For instance, the selling of indulgences arose from the people's fear of their own death and the death of family members. They were told that they could get an indulgence if they paid a certain amount of money to the Church, which went towards the building of the cathedrals of Europe. And so, the people became targets of misleading teachings by elders that were not beneficial to their deeper understanding of the faith.

Martin Luther became critical about these and other practices in the Church. He said that the word of God could only be found in the Bible, and only the scriptures will provide a stable point, an anchor for the faith. In this manner, the whole Protestant Reformation movement started, wherein there was a heavy reliance on scripture and not on the teachings or traditions of the Church.

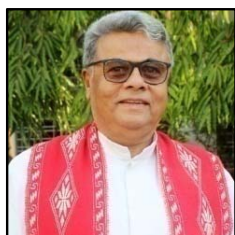
Unfortunately, Martin Luther was not often given a hearing in the Church, which caused him to break away, taking many people with him. What was Martin Luther trying to do? He was trying to find an anchor for the faith. As I mentioned earlier, St. Paul says, in his letter to the Thessalonians, ‘Discern everything and hold on firmly to all that is right’. How do we discern everything? What are the reference points, the criteria that are used for our discernment? We must use the word of God found in the scriptures. But there is also the living, authentic tradition of the Church that interprets scripture for present times. For instance, if we want to find out something about biomedical ethics, like IVF, or about nuclear war, we will not find anything in the scriptures, because they did not address such matters which did not exist at that time. But the Church today reads and interprets the scriptures for our present times.

So we need to hold on to both as criteria for understanding what is right, Let us pray that all of us may not be naive and infantile in our faith. Jesus himself questioned the teachings of the elders, and so, we also must discern whatever is taught to us. Today, even children who are studying in Sunday school are becoming critical, and that is good. They should question the faith, and the Sunday school teachers should give them the right of critical thinking and learning about the faith, and not their private opinions. Each one of us needs these reference points.

I remember in one of my previous parishes, there was a convent, where there was a sister who had to undergo dialysis. This went on for a very long period of time, and the sisters began to wonder whether they should continue with the treatment. They came and asked me my opinion. I didn’t give them an answer. I asked them to look at the scriptures and gave them a reference in the Catechism of the Catholic Church that speaks about euthanasia (mercy killing). I asked them to read that and then, discern what is right for them to do in the midst of a concrete problem in their community. They did that and came up with a very appropriate solution. That is the mature way in which each one of us must be able to test what is right around us.

Today, we are bombarded by the media with teachings that could be confusing. We are bombarded by teachings even within the Church that could be diverse. And so, we need to have this discernment, based on the scriptures and on the authentic, living tradition of the Church. May each one of us always grow in that faith. There is no end to the learning in our faith. It must be an ongoing process of understanding life and understanding what God wants us to do in the concrete situations of life. Amen.

Let us pray to our heavenly Father that each one of us may deepen our faith, so that we don’t rely on accidentals, but on what is essential. We pray ‘Our Father...’



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