

26th Sunday (A)

1st October 2023

‘Humility and Synodality’

Ezek 18: *What the Lord does is unjust? Is it not what you do that is unjust?* Ps 24: Remember Your mercy, Lord. Phil 2: *He emptied Himself ... even to accepting death, death on a Cross* Mt 21:28–32: *“think better of it and believe in him”*

After several Sundays recently in which we have heard of blessed interactions between Our Lord and St Peter, the eyes of the Church and indeed the world are turned this weekend to St Peter’s in Rome, for several reasons. Yesterday morning, in bright sunshine and under blue Italian skies, Pope Francis elevated to the Sacred College of Cardinals 21 new members, truly drawn from the four corners of the world: Spain, Poland, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Argentina, Colombia, South Sudan, Tanzania ... (the list goes on!). A friend of mine was there, in Piazza S. Pietro, as a priest she knew in her parish as a girl in Malaysia was raised to a Cardinal. I’m sure she’s thinking, this weekend, who would have believed it? The Cardinals — including the newly elected ones — truly represent the universal ‘Catholic’ nature of the Church, global, and endowed with the mission of carrying Christ to the whole world. Please God, they will be blessed in the ways in which they

humbly and faithfully carry out their sacred role of assisting Pope Francis in his guidance and governance of the Church as successor of St Peter.

Why did the Pope choose this weekend for that *consistory* — the creation of new Cardinals? Well, the answer to that is quite simple. It’s because they can then be there for an even greater event beginning this week in Rome, and which will run for the whole month: the latest Synod of Bishops. Synods are held every few years in Rome, called by the Pope. This is the 16th Ordinary Synod in the last 55 yrs since the 2nd Vatican Council (there have been 3 Extraordinary Synods too, and 11 Special synods on specific regions of the world). Technically speaking, these recent Synods of Bishops in Rome are not *synods* in the traditional sense of the word — i.e. they are not decision-making bodies, with powers to determine local practice, or elect local bishops etc. Instead, these occasional Synods of Bishops in Rome are opportunities for the Bishop of Rome to hear from an international representation of the world’s bishops their opinions and interventions on a whole host of

topics that concern the Church. They are, in that sense, an optional, advisory body, allowing the Holy Father to gauge the sense of the Church's people on topics that he deems important. In the last decade, we have had Synods of Bishops on 'The Mission of the Family,' 'Young People & Vocation,' and on the Amazon region.

The Synod opening this week in Rome is to discuss and discern the topic of *synodality*. Now, that's not an easy idea to get one's head around. The very word "synodality" is not exactly one in everyday usage, is it? (My Microsoft Word dictionary definitely didn't recognise it!) But "synodality" is (literally) to "walk with," i.e. to think about how the Church might be more attentive to the *local* conditions, to respond in a more welcoming and inclusive way in the everyday circumstances of acting, preaching, and celebrating as the Church of Christ. In other words, how are we called to preach the truth — in all its aspects — whilst at the same time 'carrying people with us,' and not putting them off in the way we present that truth; especially given that some of those truths might be

'hard truths' (truths, yes, but hard to hear). Now, it's good to realise that these Synods have a very different status to an *Ecumenical Council* (such as the Council of Trent, Vatican I, Vatican II) which is the highest doctrinal body of the Church and in which Christian doctrine itself can be determined and taught. Whilst there has been much hope and much attention given to this Synod (which is just Part I; Part II will be in a year's time), it's important not to have some notion that this meeting is about changing, denying, or undermining the Church's solid doctrinal teaching. Instead, as so often, it's a matter of how to *present* that divine teaching, in the conditions of the modern day, and in accordance with local needs. With a Church that is truly global, and where the challenges to the Church's teaching are also manifold and truly persistent — the effects of sin, so often twisting the human spirit away from the pursuit of godly perfection — it is good for us to reflect on how, as the Church, we respond, how as the Church we deliver the Gospel most effectively, whilst at the same time staying absolutely true to the mind of Christ in every detail.

This Synod in October 2023 is not some exercise of a false ‘democracy,’ with all things up for grabs according to a popular vote. That’s not how the Lord Jesus has established His Church. He has given us teachers, pastors, bishops & a Pope to exercise truly divine doctrinal guidance, a gift of God the Father. They can only teach in accordance with perennial Christian truth, established from the start by Christ and His apostles. Nevertheless, our pastors and our Pope can be helped by the whole people of God praying, listening to the Spirit, and making truly heroic efforts at presenting the faith with a fresh spirit, and with genuine charity for the other. Appropriately enough, the Synod begins in prayer — in fact, it already has, with an ecumenical prayer vigil last night, with Scripture, hymns, prayers and a profound and prolonged period of silence in the same Piazza S. Pietro where the new cardinals in their scarlet had been created in the morning. The Pope was accompanied by many other Christian leaders — including Orthodox leaders such as the Patriarchs of Constantinople and of Alexandria, and

leaders of Western Christian denominations such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, all of whom were there to support the Catholic Church in its prayer for this time of synodal discussion. And for three further days, from today until Tuesday, the Synod participants will attend a retreat together: *praying* before *discussing*, as is so spiritually necessary. We too should join our prayers with theirs, as they prepare for Synod’s start on Wednesday, feast of St Francis. The Pope last night had some beautiful words to share on silence and prayer, as he led those in the piazza, and in the world, into these days of Synod. He said:

This evening, we Christians have been silent before the *San Damiano* Cross, as disciples listening before the cross, the Master’s throne. Ours was not an empty silence, but a moment filled with faith, expectation and readiness. In a world full of noise, we are no longer accustomed to silence; indeed sometimes we struggle with it, because silence forces us to face God and ourselves. ... This reminds us that silence, in the ecclesial community, makes fraternal communication possible, where the Holy Spirit draws together points of view, because he *is* harmony. To be synodal is to welcome one another like this, in the knowledge that we all have something to share and to learn, gathering together to listen to the “Spirit of truth” (*Jn* 14:17) in order to know what the Lord “is saying to the churches” (*Rev* 2:7). ... In common prayer we ask to learn again to be silent: to listen to the voice of the Father, the call of Jesus, and the groaning of the Spirit. Let us ask that the Synod be a *kairós* of

fraternity, a place where the Holy Spirit will purify the Church from gossip, ideologies and polarization.

I want now to bring this homily back to the Scripture of the Sunday, and not simply leave it as a ‘lecture’ on the Synod! Let’s focus on that beautiful 2nd reading from Philippians, because it seems to me that the key to the Synod — especially to our *own* approach to listening to the Synod’s deliberations (it ties in with Pope Francis’s words just there) — is *humility*; humility after the pattern of Our Lord Jesus: *He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.* These words of an early Christian hymn that St Paul incorporated into his letter praise Jesus for the incredible humility He showed as He came from heaven and took flesh on earth amongst us.

This example of humility is placed before us so that we, as Christians, can imitate it. If even God has let Himself be humbled like this, reducing Himself from heavenly glory to be enclosed in the form of a man; and then letting Himself be taken for a criminal and executed

on a Cross ... if He is willing to do that for us, then we *surely* should be able to manage a bit of humility ourselves. St Paul spells it out: *There is to be no competition amongst you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first, but everybody thinks of other people’s interests instead.* It’s a huge task, as a Christian, to grow more like this, more and more like Christ. But we *can* have this mindset, a humble ‘walking-with’ as we think about, and pray for, the Synod. Let’s persevere: let’s keep at this task that God has given us, of keeping faith, and offering it humbly to others. A humble life is a good life, a life that others can imitate and so grow together towards heaven. For life is not about great achievements, except the greatness of loving God, and this is achieved through simple humility. Let’s pray for the grace of humility to inhabit this whole synodal process, and lead Synod participants, & the whole Church, and all who will ever meet us, to Jesus Christ.