

Sermon for Second Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Isaiah 62:1–5; 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 & John 2:1–11

As we continue to witness the decline of church attendance and the importance of religion in Western society, especially in countries that were previously strongholds of Christianity, it is not surprising that some people might question God's commitment to His faithful people, to those who remain loyal and committed to Him. This is not a new phenomena.

This is exactly the situation described in our first reading this morning from the Book of Isaiah. The people of Judah had witnessed the destruction of both the Temple in Jerusalem and the city of Jerusalem itself by the Babylonians, and they themselves had been sent into exile in Babylon. In their eyes, God had done nothing to prevent this tragedy from happening. He either didn't want to do anything, which therefore meant that He had abandoned His people or, as their Babylonian captors taunted, He wasn't capable of helping them, which then meant that the gods of Babylon were superior to the God of Israel. These were the two questions they were left asking themselves. Has God abandoned us, or, is God powerless against the gods of Babylon?

These questions appeared to have been answered when, after having been exiled in Babylon for 70 years, Babylon itself was conquered by the Persians, and Cyrus, the king of Persia, gave permission for the Jewish exiles to return home to Jerusalem and Judah, and not only that, but he also gave them access to resources and funds to rebuild both the city and the Temple. It seemed that God had not abandoned the Jewish people, and not only that, but it also appeared that He had totally crushed the gods of Babylon.

And yet, after having endured the hardships of exile, having undertaken the risk of returning to their devastated homeland, and having put their backs to the task of rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple, evidence was mounting that this new era of peace and justice was fading in the face of what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles faced by the returned exiles. The resolve necessary to keep the rebuilding effort on track was being broken by doubts regarding the credibility of their God. The God who had not prevented the Babylonians and their gods from destroying Jerusalem, appeared to be still powerless to reestablish the security of the Jewish people. Or perhaps God was indifferent, lacking in resolve or commitment to His struggling people. However, as history informs us, the restoration of both the city and the Temple was completed, and both remained standing for more than five centuries until their destruction by the Romans in year 70BC. This speaks to us once again of how events happen in God's time, and not in our time.

In today's passage from the Gospel of John, when prompted by his mother (Mary) to fix the problem of the wine running out at the wedding reception in Cana, Jesus responded by telling her that "my hour has not yet come", meaning that it was not yet time for God to reveal Himself in and through Jesus. This revelation would happen progressively through a series of "signs" (or miracles) that Jesus would perform, each of which revealed something of the glory of God.

This story, of the 'Wedding in Cana', occurs only in the Gospel of John, and one of its most striking features is the disdain, or lack of respect, with which Jesus treats his mother. His immediate response, to her request to provide assistance to the organisers of the wedding,

is to say to her, very bluntly, “Woman, what has that got to do with you and me.” One explanation I have read for this apparent lack of respect towards Mary, is that it demonstrates that a world exists between Jesus and God, and that Mary is outside of that world.¹ The words of Jesus to his mother remind her of this fact, and his rebuke keeps her in her place as it were.²

But to return to the theme of events happening in God’s time, and not our own, that is perhaps how we are to cope with what, at times, may seem like God’s apparent absence, and or lack of commitment, to issues facing the church, such as declining attendances. In the meantime we, who have answered God’s call to become members of the church, can continue to make our own contribution to the life of the church through the use of the various gifts that each of us have been given.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul reminded the members of the church in Corinth that no individual member was more important than any other member of the church. Each of them had been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was demonstrated through the various abilities that each individual member had. Some were wise, while others were good communicators. Some were able to heal, and others were able to perform miracles, while yet others could speak in tongues. The important fact for them to understand, was that each of their own individual abilities had been activated by the Holy Spirit, none of it was of their own doing. And the sum of those individual abilities, worked for the benefit and betterment of the church as a whole, as it still does today with our own abilities.

So while we might at times feel disappointed that things are not happening as quickly as we would like them to, we can remind ourselves that we have been called into the church, that is, into the body of Christ in the world, to make our own positive contribution to the life and future of the church.

¹ Francis J. Moloney, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), eBook Location 2118.

² Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, eBook Location 2118.