

Sunday Worship

Sunday 29th April 2007

From San Francisco

Fr Donal Godfrey, Society of Jesus, leads a service from the Catholic Parish of Most Holy Redeemer, San Francisco, exploring how gay people can find a place in the Christian narrative and speak of the gift of faith. The preacher is the Catholic writer and theologian, Fr James Alison.

Father Donal

Good morning and welcome to the Most Holy Redeemer faith community in San Francisco. This Roman Catholic parish is placed, not just at the heart of a great city but also at the heart of the world's first gay neighborhood, the Castro.

San Francisco is famous for a large gay community, and also as a tourist destination with its cable cars, golden gate bridge and of course its fog! But it's not just a beautiful place to stay; over the years, this city has had to learn to live with wide diversity. It's had to discover that difference is not always a threat, but often a gift. And this is certainly true of Most Holy Redeemer where although approximately 80% of the parishioners here are gay, it is the mix of gay and straight that makes this place special.

As the words of our first hymn put it, - 'All are welcome!'

Hymn: All are welcome - Marty Haugen

Father Donal

Lord, you have given all peoples one common origin,
And your will is to gather them as one family in yourself.
May we secure justice and equality for every human being,
An end to all division,
And a human society built on love and peace.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, for ever and ever.

All: Amen

All are welcome! Things were not always so. When the neighborhood first began attracting gay people over forty years ago this parish was the center of opposition to those arriving. But God has a way of surprising and calling us into community. Today the parish is a place of hope for both the gay and the Catholic community. This, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that neither seems completely comfortable with each other.

But, as our pastor Fr Steve Meriwether says: "You will find the good people of our parish, old, young, married, gay, lesbian, straight, transgender, affluent, homeless, blue-collar, radical, questioning, and fervent. We seem to be a parish with no accidental parishioners: everyone singing in our pews or making sandwiches for the poor in our hall is committed to a vision of a better world and a better Church to serve it."

A short walk from Most Holy Redeemer parish church is an enormous rainbow flag which can be seen from many parts of the city. It's here that the rainbow flag was first invented by Gilbert Baker for use at San Francisco's Gay Pride in 1978, but is now recognized as the symbol for gay people all over the world.

For me, as a Catholic priest, I love seeing these rainbow flags, not only because they are special to the gay community, but also because they remind me of that place in Genesis when God tells Noah that the rainbow is a symbol of the covenant between God and all of creation.

Catherine

"When I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh."

Father Donal

Here, in God's words to Noah we see that having a rainbow in the sky was a sign that the flood was over and that creation could now rest secure.

I learnt this truth here at this Catholic parish. The message of the rainbow is that for God there is no "us and them." This sign of the Rainbow given to Noah teaches us that ultimately there are only God's children. We are all the rainbow people of God.

Most Holy Redeemer parish, here in San Francisco, should not be that rare exception; most often our churches make it difficult to acknowledge, let alone celebrate, the truth of the rainbow.

Many times I have listened to those who experience deep pain in struggling to bring together their being gay and spiritual. This seems so whether one is Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Catholic or Protestant. But in all of this, I believe it is God who calls and loves all of us whatever our sexual orientation. It is God who calls us to be fully human and fully alive.

Our first reading this morning is read by Maggie Franks, a member of our Sunday School.

Maggie

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. Jesus came to the tomb; it was a cave and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone. So they took away the stone. Martha the sister of the dead man said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Hymn:Behold (Magnificat with refrain)

Father Donal

Paradoxically, it is here in this gay neighborhood of San Francisco that I have learnt that there is a sense in which coming out is actually for everyone, and not only for gay people. For it is not only gay people who need to come out of the tombs of our own making in this life. As the writer and theologian Elizabeth Stuart says we need to listen to Jesus call us all to come out of our tombs and speak the truth of who we really are. We need to listen and respond to Jesus inviting each of us to take off the shrouds that keep us from being ourselves, before God and each other. It may come slowly or quite unexpectedly and suddenly, this realization that you are entombed but need not be; this realization that

what you thought was evil, corrupting, life denying is in fact good, liberating, and life giving.

Sr Clea Herold, is the former pastoral associate for this parish:

Sr Clea Herold

When we decided to open the doors of this church to the gay community, 22 years ago, I discovered that what we were doing was in fact unbinding God. We were having to look at our own narrative of who god is, be it a white god, or a black god, male, female, straight, or gay. Through my ministry with all these sincere searchers for God, I came to understand that all our images of God are broken, because when we to speak images of God, we always diminish him. Theology always tells us that God is always greater and I think that is what we come to know through our experience. It is here that I have discovered that God is always more - He is beyond our limitations, our words. It can be frightening and confusing because we meet a God who refuses to legitimize our agendas, refuses to let us be less than we are because he first loves us and sees us as human beings and calls us into the fullness of life. We're always tempted to make God in our own image, but God refuses these images and leads us to see him 'face to face'. When that happens, in a sense, it is our understanding of God healed. We come to see that this God is too big to hate or reject or to stigmatize those he created and died for.

And so this is the community where I find the words of St John's letter come alive and inspire my life:

God is love
And we who abide in love
Abide in God
And God in us.

Hymn:Nigra Sum (Pablo Casals) a song of love.

Father Donal

Nigra Sum, a song of love between God and humanities soul, words taken from the Song of Solomon and set to music by the Spanish composer, Pablo Casals.

I belonged to the Jesuit community in Belfast, Northern Ireland for four years. I remember during that time meeting a young man (I will call him Mark) at special Masses which were for gay pride in Derry. Mark later killed himself by jumping into the River

Foyle, largely it seemed to me, because he did not know how to accept himself as a gay man.

Obviously one cannot say precisely what leads someone to such a tragic death. However, I did find myself reflecting on his premature death, this terrible loss, Archbishop Tutu says that when Churches make gay people doubt whether they are children of God - that must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy.

I often meet families and parents of gay people facing the issue of their children coming out. Paul came out to his mother after living in a committed relationship with his partner for many years. I remember how upset his mother was to have been excluded from the life of her son for so long. Let's listen to Marie in her own words.

Marie

My catholic upbringing does not come against my acceptance of my son's gayness. I believe our sexual orientation is genetic. I am a parent who has always said that all I want is for my children to be happy, to be true to themselves and not live their life for my happiness. Yes, this is not an easy journey but love is what parenting is all about. If you don't love, you don't experience pain. Parenting is painful. Having lost a child through death I was not going to lose a living one through rejection."

Father Donal

And so to our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, read by Roz Gallo.

Roz

Gospel: Matthew 9, 10-13

And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples.

And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Father Donal

This morning we're delighted to welcome Dr James Alison, Catholic priest and author who will be preaching for us in a moment.

Hymn:In the Breaking of the Bread.

Homily James Alison

What I like about this story is the sense of Jesus buying time. He's having a meal with his disciples and with a whole lot of tax collectors and sinners. And the Pharisees, the local God Squad, have found out about it. They've got their sources of intelligence who are watching what is going on with Jesus. It's only partially because they think he might be a troublemaker, or a rabble-rouser, or just a bad man. They may have their concerns about that, but they're not sure. They're also curious. They want to know whether he might not, after all, be a prophet, someone who works signs from God.

The trouble is, he doesn't seem to fit into their narrative of what a good man or a Prophet should be. Parts of him do, and parts of him don't. Which makes him particularly dangerous, and particularly worth watching.

Now because the religious leaders have some awe of Jesus, they don't actually dare to ask him what's going on directly. So they make their complaint to the disciples: "Your teacher's got you hanging around with a pretty rum collection of characters. So in addition to being ritually unclean, don't you think he's putting you in danger of some kind of moral contagion as well?" Well the message gets passed back to Jesus through the usual Chinese whispers, and of course, the process of Chinese whispers can lead to all sorts of murmuring, making those at the meal feel uneasy. So Jesus faces down the source of the gossip by speaking up, and talking directly to those who wouldn't talk to him.

He shows his ease at being among people the religious authorities regard as sinners, and tells them that he's where he should be, with the people who need him, where as they, the Pharisees appear not to. And in addition, he quotes them a verse from the Prophet Hosea: "What I want is Mercy, not sacrifice", and then tells them to go and learn what it means.

That, I think, is where he plays for time. He tells them that before you can apply the word of God, you need to have dwelt under it, and sunk into its digestive juices for a long, long time, so as to make quite sure that you are not using it to sacrifice people, but instead, to show them God's mercy and love.

Now the people I like to think of in this story, are the people for whom Jesus' answer bought time. The Tax collectors and sinners whose meal with him he wouldn't allow to be interrupted. That's us. One of the joys of being a lesbian or gay Catholic in a parish group like this at Most Holy Redeemer is being able to spend the time that Jesus has bought for us sharing his meal with him, and being given time to undergo his regard.

He's bought time for us because he's sent off the authorities to work out what God means by saying that he wants Mercy and not Sacrifice.

Meanwhile, we get to spend that time dining with him, and, just being there with him, feeling loved and cared for, and known and invited by him. And that has an extraordinary effect on us. It starts to give us new ways of receiving who we are. So that little by little we are able to let go of stories about ourselves which we have heard since we were young, about how we are sick, and our love is dangerous, and not real, and we should be ashamed of ourselves, and hide away.

Instead of this, we find ourselves, listening to him telling us stories. And as we gather in safe spaces, where we are allowed to be who we are; and as we hear his voice, and react from our hearts, sit in his regard and lose our masks, and eat and drink his body and blood, so we find our own stories lightening up. We start imagining ourselves in different ways, finding eyes of respect for others as we find ourselves sitting with one who respects us.

So we learn to hear a voice which calls us by name: you who were no people, you are MY people. We're confident that we will be able to hear that voice calling us by name, and giving us a story which will be God's story, even in the midst of whatever forms of anger they will display when they find us so free.

And it will be because of the time that Jesus bought, to be with us, because he liked us, sharing himself with us and telling us his stories, and so showing us how to become unimagined living stories whose endings know neither fear nor shame. This is what we are privileged to be undergoing when we come to worship Our Lord in the Holy Mass.

Father Donal

And so to our prayers, led by members of our Young Adult group:

Reader 1

Lord, realizing how precious we all are in your eyes, we ask that we would learn how to treat each other with the respect, understanding, and dignity you show. Help us be part of your struggle to make the world a place where there are no strangers.

Choir:Response 'God of All People'

Reader 2

Lord, you told us that the truth shall set us free. Be with all who are isolated, in fear, and in some countries persecuted because of speaking their truth.

Choir:Response 'God of All People'

Reader 3

Let us pray for an end to war and violence throughout the world. We pray that we can always remember that there is no true peace without justice. May we always strive to find non military solutions for the worlds problems.

Choir:Response 'God of All People'

Reader 4

Lord, help us to imitate our city's patron, Saint Francis in following you. In a culture that is about achievement, appearance, and affluence, help us realize that you are found especially in those people and places without power, or what this world counts as success. Help us create those structures that will end world hunger and bring human rights to all.

Father Donal

In the words our savior taught us, we unite all our prayers:

All

Our Father,
Who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done
On earth, as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us,
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.
Amen.

Father Donal

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers,

half truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people so that you may work for justice, equality, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out in solidarity.

May God bless you with the foolishness to think you can make a difference in the world, so that you will do the things that others may tell you cannot be done.

And may almighty God bless you all, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

All

Amen

Hymn: Jerusalem! My Destiny.

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