

## HOMILY EASTER 2 190428 SW3

Quite a few of us here today have spent some years in education, whether school or university, but I wonder how many lectures or classes we can really remember? But, you know, there is one class I can really remember and also the question the lecturer asked us. There, standing in front of the lecture hall full of students, he asked us all: "When is the Pope most the Pope?" That's it, "When is the Pope most the Pope?" Think about it: "When is the Pope most the Pope?"

The answer he gave is this: the Pope is most the Pope when, on Easter Sunday morning, he stands on the balcony on the front of St Peter's Basilica and proclaims to the City and the World: "Christ is Risen!" At that moment he is doing exactly what St Peter did. At that moment he is announcing the most important piece of good news the world has ever heard. Let's not forget how this is important for us, today, for as St Paul says: "If Christ is not risen, then our faith is in vain".

Now of course St Peter, and the Pope, have much more to say. There is a whole string of theological truths about the suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. However, if one looks at the preaching of St Peter, one finds much more good news there than these bits of theology, very important though they be. The Good News is good news in so many ways.

Let's just remember that in the first century Mediterranean world the Gospel was being preached to a society in which everybody was pigeon-holed according to their status; separate communities with their own rules and customs. Some were free citizens, but many were slaves, Jews and Samaritans would not mix, Romans and Greeks looked down on those they called "barbarians". Then along comes St Peter and St Paul, saying that not only could one eat anything, but one could and should mix with everyone. Jew or Greek, it didn't matter, slave or free, it didn't matter. Oh, there were problems to be sure in adapting, but the Good News called people to celebrate together, now that all were one in Christ, and everyone was a member of the body of Christ.

I was reminded of this the other day. I was catching up on some TV I had missed. Someone had recommended a programme on BBC called "Pilgrimage". It was about a group, of course "celebrities", on pilgrimage to Rome. There was Les Dennis, Dana, Lesley Joseph, and few others, including one I knew nothing about, Stephen Amos. There were making their way, mainly walking, in stages down the Via Francigena. It's an ancient pilgrim route; that in its final stages winds its way down the centre of Italy, to Rome. The programme showed them getting to know each other and sharing a series of adventures on their way.

However, it is the end of the third episode that really is worth watching. Finally they have made it to Rome. Then they are told that their small group is to have a private audience with Pope Francis. Their reactions vary, of course. Some more excited than others. Now, at this point, Stephen Amos, who on the way had shared something of his emotional suffering, makes it clear that he has a beef with the Catholic Church and that he would feel a hypocrite if he were to meet the pope and not put his point across.

So the scene is set. The camera work and the editing emphasise what a privilege it is for the group to meet the pope this way, in contrast to the thousands of pilgrims who are to attend the General Audience in St Peter's Square. Seated across the room from Pope Francis, Stephen says his piece. He

has lost his mother and twin sister, who were both “religious” and died recently. In contrast to their faith, as a gay man, he feels excluded. The Pope, speaking in Italian, answers him thus. It is wrong to judge someone by an adjective. It is the noun that matters, in other words we are all human, and as such have a dignity that matters. To exclude or discriminate on the basis of some aspect of a person’s identity is wrong. This is the good news Stephen Amos has been waiting to hear. One can see very clearly how this affects him. Indeed it is the good news many need to hear, throughout the world today.

Now to some this may sound like a bit of wishy washy sociology. So think about what happens when people are not valued and not respected as human beings, all made in the image and likeness of God. For it when this is forgotten that it becomes all too easy to plant bombs in churches or crowded hotels, or spray a synagogue with bullets. Given the difficulties we can all face with our prejudices, it is crucial that we have an understanding of the value of every human life which is based on more than simple human respect. Here we see the crucial importance of seeing that our dignity is a divine dimension of our humanity. For, thanks to the resurrection of Jesus Christ the horizon of humanity has been changed, we now live with eternity as our horizon. We have been shown that eternal life is the destiny to which we are called. It is in this context that we are challenged to be concerned about the lives of everyone, the conditions in which they live, the environment which we should cherish and will pass on to future generations.

So, when is a Catholic most a Catholic? When is a Catholic most a Catholic? When she or he, when we, all of us in our own circumstances, affirm the life and God-given dignity of everyone we meet. It may not be easy, and we can often fall back into judging, blocking ourselves off from people, discriminating etc. However, this Easter season is a time for us to celebrate the good news that the Gospel brings. Yes, proclaim the “Christ is Risen”, but, at the same time, ladies and gentlemen, you and I, we are called to embrace and respect the reality of all the brothers and sisters with whom we share this planet.

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