

6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR A, 2020

Rather than focusing on the Gospel this week, it is worth just drawing our attention to the second reading, which comes from the first letter of St Peter. If you have never read it, it is worth doing so. It would only take you about ten minutes. It is a pastoral letter, but it is full of timeless theological insight.

One of those insights is that simple line, 'always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have'. Peter is presumably responding to a particular context and encouraging the people in their faith, but that simple line has come to sum-up the whole enterprise of theological enquiry and dialogue itself in the Christian tradition. For the basic intellectual assumption of the Christian tradition is that the faith is *reasonable*; that it makes sense. It is clearer in the original Greek but both those words, 'answer' and 'reason', are rooted in the word 'logos' (the word): the principle of reason, purpose and direction itself. An educated Greek person believed it was a mark of intelligence to be able to give a 'logos' for your beliefs and actions. This is precisely what Peter is encouraging; but he would also have been conscious of the allusion to The Logos itself, to Jesus Christ, the guiding principle and answer to all things.

What St Peter is succinctly expressing and presuming in his Christian faith is that the God of Revelation in Jesus Christ is the same God of creation. The world and God, earth and heaven, reason and faith are not in opposition; they are in harmony. And as such, it is necessary in the Christian faith to give rational explanations for the truth to which we dearly hold. Herein lies the principle of all Christian apologetics down through the centuries – from St Justin Martyr to St Thomas Aquinas and to the present day. The Christian faith will always seek to give reasons for the hope we have to those who ask us.

Of course, herein also lies the great challenge for us. It means that we too have to be informed of our faith. We have to inform ourselves! We must be able to give reasons for the hope we have to people who ask it of us. It is no good to expect our high school level of understanding of the Christian faith to last us all our lives. For anything that is important in life, we grow and deepen in our understanding of it, we study, we learn, we mature. If such is that case for worldly interests, like the sciences, our hobbies, our careers, how much more important will it be for the ultimate questions of life itself.

It does not mean that we all must be theologians nor that the Christian faith is merely an intellectual system of ideas for the intelligent. No, the Christian faith is a person: Jesus Christ. But anyone who loves a person necessarily wants to know that person better and better. And if we love Jesus Christ, we necessarily want to know him better and better too. This is the point of desiring to have reasons for the hope we have, each in accordance with his or her ability: it's because we love The Lord and wish to share his love with others.

However, notice also what St Peter goes on to say. He says that we must give our reasons 'with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience'. In other words, stuffing our beliefs down other people's throats never really works. It is right and fitting that we pass on the faith in our families and that, as children, we were 'forced' to go to Mass, to learn our prayers, to learn about the faith. That's usually because our parents loved us and wanted the best for us. But, ultimately, the time comes when we must learn to wrestle with the truths of the faith ourselves. The faith must be a 'first-hand discovery and not a second-hand story'. There are many people who bemoan the experience of a strict, Christian upbringing but rarely have the personal integrity of finding out for themselves why the Church teaches what she teaches. And yet, there are usually amazing reasons for why she does so.

Likewise, in our dealings with others, when we do believe the faith and, in sincerity of heart, with joy wish to pass it on to others, we too have to give our reasons with 'courtesy and respect'. As St John Paul II said, 'the Church proposes the faith, she does not impose it'. Because the Christian faith is necessarily dogmatic – it believes in concrete things as true and others as false – it leads to argumentation, in the best of senses. In our argumentation with others, therefore, we should always love and will the good of the other more than loving to win the argument. The purpose of theological dialogue and disputation is to win souls, not arguments. And people can almost always tell when its arguments you love to win!

Nevertheless, it does remain incumbent upon all of us to learn more about our faith and deepen in our knowledge and love of God, so that when people do ask us why we believe in Jesus Christ and his Church we are able to give reasons for the hope we all have. Perhaps as a purely practical place to finish, ask yourself this question: do I have a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in my household? If not, why not?