

## A Homily for the First Sunday of the Academic Year

Jesus said: *Anyone who does the truth comes out into the light.*

Today the word of God comes to us with a parable, and we must let it question us as Jesus' parables always do. He shows us two sons of one father, who have diametrically opposite attitudes. One speaks graciously, but acts disobediently, and the other speaks ungraciously, but obeys.

In the religious sense I feel I'm living in a world that has adopted the habit of speaking ungraciously. It is still the world God made, it still, to my mind, glitters with his creating light. But we have lost the power, at least in our part of it, to reflect God. Inundated by streams of divine light, our Western culture has made itself dull and matt: absorbent of light, but not acknowledging it. In this we have impoverished and desecrated ourselves. Over and over again I meet a deep sense of loss in people. They find themselves reluctantly playing the graceless rôle the world has given them, forced to seek the fast buck and acquire the heartlessness of the marketplace; they are cornered into the selfishness and individualism of the postmodern mindset, and they find themselves invaded by commercial hungers, by a consumerism which never feeds its addicts. Yet people have a deep awareness of loss and of dishonour. We are impassively forced to bury our ideals, and to accept life in an orphaned world; we are like children whose memory of a lost, loving family is an ever-receding dream.

Scripture speaks to this condition with amazing accuracy. It's immensely consoling to me to realise that we are not experiencing any monstrous new syndrome of evil. What we are experiencing is that *the Word was the true light, that enlightens all who live; he came into the world that came in to being through him, and the world did not recognise him; he came to his own, and his own people did not accept him.* The gracelessness of the world, its distance from its true dignity, is elemental to the story of Christ and the Cross. Therefore encountering this ignorance, this inability for the divine, doesn't separate us from the work of redemption, but unites us with Jesus, who himself encountered it and suffered from it. His suffering from it is the Cross, which is the heart of our faith.

Now let us think again about the two brothers in the parable. We perceive at once that Jesus, who sat down to eat with tax-collectors and sinners, has great hopes for the graceless world. He is unafraid of its hostility, especially when it springs from ignorance and exhaustion; he sees it not as a positive value, but as a form of poverty. What constantly appears in Jesus is a genuine concern, almost amounting to horror, over false religion – that which says all the right words, and seems to treasure its credentials, but does not hold real power in the heart, and is empty of the obedience which *does the truth*. It is not those who say to me *Lord, Lord* who will enter the kingdom, but the one who does the will of my Father.

During the last week we have been offering to the students of the University the services of the Chaplaincy and the various religious societies. One of the handouts was labelled *Christianity for those who don't like religion*. This well-intentioned initiative, to my mind, misses the mark. Jesus loved his religion, and was insistent on the keeping of the letter of its law. His sitting down with sinners was never intended to convey indifference to sin. His main preoccupation was to reach across

the divide that separates the religiously alienated from God. Jesus in the Gospels knows that there is a religion that is deeper than words or credentials, and it is to that deeper level that he makes his appeal. Our faith begins with water, with the deep water of life.

We are people who have been trained to say the Creed, to observe the liturgical life of the Church, to meditate on the Scripture as we are doing now. These are our “gracious words.” We must make certain that the words we say hold their own in our heart, so that we can speak as Jesus did to the heart of the world, calling it to the true life he lived, and offered to share. That is why we are here, as the Church in the University. We are part of the bridge which Jesus wanted to build between God and the world. We must be sure that we are truly bonded into the structure, so that our lives form a trustworthy part of the Way for those who share this place of learning with us. May God give us the grace to speak his word, and to do his truth in our lives.