

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

The point was often made when people were commenting upon the visit of Pope Francis to Ireland that the Church and the Irish Society had changed a lot since the last visit of a Pope. It is nearly forty years since Pope John Paul visited Ireland. The economics of Ireland have changed in that time. The Church has had to face the scandal of the revelation of clerical sex abuse in those years since 1979. Its loss of influence in society can perhaps be measured by the laws allowing same sex marriage and abortion.

But it not only in Ireland where things have changed. Can you and I compare how things were for us in 1979 and how they are for us now? Can we think of what kind of a Church we were forty years ago? Can we remember what life was like for us when we were forty years younger. I was the assistant priest at Woodville and still young enough to ride my pushbike up to the Flinders Rangers and back, so that I could have a cheap holiday.

I found it very interesting to read today's gospel in the context of a Church that was changing. It describes the controversy that Jesus had with some of the Scribes and Pharisees over the rituals about food. But what we are reading here may not be so much about what Jesus said or did not say about these rituals, but rather a reflection of how the early Church was trying to work out what

they needed to do with the rituals they were familiar with. The Church that Mark was part of was a Church made up of Jewish and non-Jewish people. They were still learning how much to hold onto from the past and how much of their past they could let go. They were learning how much of the Jewish law was still helpful for them and how much of it was a burden that they need not carry.

The laws about what food was clean and what was unclean and so could not be eaten, was historically very helpful for the Jewish people. It kept them healthy. But any law can lose its purpose over time and needs to be re-examined. People can get so attached to a law that they can be enslaved by it.

There were other difficulties for the early Church communities when they were trying to define what was essential and what was not. The religious life of faithful Jews changed radically when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. Israelites had to find new ways of worship. They had to find new structures and new laws to live by. The early Church communities often found themselves defining who they were in contrast to the reformed Israelite communities.

I suppose it was a bit like what happened to the Catholic Church after the Protestant Reformation. The Council of

Trent had to redefine what we believed in contrast to what the reformers were saying and doing. It was not until the Second Vatican Council that we had the freedom to look again at who we are as Church without looking over our shoulder at what others were saying about us. It was only after the Second Vatican Council that we could begin dialogues with other Christian Churches and other Communities of Faith to learn from them some of the truths that we had been overlooking.

Some of us may be a bit nervous when we hear people say that the Church needs change. It may be helpful to remember how much the Church has changed since Jesus sent it out on mission. What I find more helpful is to ask the question why we should change. I don't think we can answer that question until we ask another. "What is the purpose of the Church?" If we believe that the purpose of the Church is to carry on the mission of Jesus, then we must keep changing to serve the changing needs of the people to whom we are sent. If the Church is for the world and the world keeps changing, then how we minister to the world in the name of Jesus must be continually changing. Pope John Paul called it the re-evangelization of the world. Pope Francis does it every time he speaks to us.

In Australia we are reaching a new moment of listening out for the kind of Church that we need to be. We are

preparing for what is being called a Plenary Council. The Council itself will not meet formally until October 2020. But the first stage of preparation for the Council has already begun. We are all invited to be part of that. Over the next eight weeks we will learn how we can be part of the Council. Today we will hear the invitation to take part.

<https://youtu.be/ezdk5ez3EcM>