

**MASS FOR THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF FATHER LUIGI GIUSSANI**

Homily notes of  
**Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin**  
Emeritus Archbishop of Dublin

Church of the Sacred Heart, Donnybrook, 15 February 2023

The Gospels are historical documents. They are however different from much of how we think about historical documents. The Gospels are not cold chronologies.

This is especially true of the Gospel of Mark that we hear in our liturgies this year. Mark has the unique ability to take flashes of true events, and to present them not necessarily in chronological order. He takes up true pictures and groups them together in a non-chronical order to help us better picture who this Jesus was or indeed, is and what his message demands from believers in every generation.

We also have to remember that the Gospels were written some decades after the events of Jesus life, death and resurrection. Mark's choice of the events and flashes that he gathers are written not just as biography. The early readers of Mark's Gospel lived at a moment in which the Church was expanding into different cultural realities. Mark challenged them to discern what a true understanding of the person of Jesus demanded of them in that situation.

Today we read these flashes to look back, yes, and help us to understand who Jesus truly was. We have to read them also to be challenged ourselves by the message and teaching of Jesus as we reflect on the situations and uncertainties of our time. We Christians today have to discern anew how to live our faith in an ever more secularised culture.

Times change and believers and the Church must address the realities of faith in the times of today. We cannot live our today in the framework of an unreal yesterday. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, describes what Mark asks of us as “regime change”. It is as radical as that. Our discernment must be truly real, truly radical and truly ongoing.

Let us go back to this evening’s Gospel reading. The first question posed is about the identity of Jesus. Jesus asks how people understood who he was and then how his disciples think. Peter responds, in the name of the apostles, that Jesus was not simply a miracle worker or a prophet, but that he was truly the Christ.

Today that question about the identity of Jesus is still actual. Our response cannot be

simply a dispassionate listing of some possible answers. Mark rather wants to remind us that if we do not understand that Jesus is truly the Christ and do not become enchanted by him, then we have failed to know who Jesus is and what being a Christian means.

We know that for many - ourselves included - our understanding of who Jesus is remains partial or indeed inadequate or dispirited. What is important it that we are never content to remain blocked in such partial faith. Our faith discernment must always be truly real, truly radical and truly ongoing.

Right throughout his life Jesus was cautious about revealing his identity. He worked miracles and forbade those who were cured to tell anyone. He never tried to impose belief in his own identity. He did not want to build a sort of

personality cult. That would only lead to a misunderstanding of his identity. He did not work miracles to be a show of power. His miracles were the fruit of his concern and mercy for those who suffer. He did not work miracles in a hermeneutic of human power, but in a hermeneutic of divine mercy.

Our Gospel reading shows us that even those close to Jesus failed to understand his identity. Peter outwardly recognises that Jesus is the Christ, but Peter is not happy when Jesus goes on to note that the Christ must first suffer and be rejected. Peter claims that he understands Jesus, but Jesus tells Peter that his understanding is still that of Satan!

In our Gospel reading this evening, Mark takes up this event to address the situation of the believers at the time he was writing. The early

Christian communities were experiencing misunderstanding and indeed persecution. They felt that Jesus seemed to be abandoning them. Mark wants them to discern that even in persecution, Jesus was truly with them but in a new way and that he never abandons them.

We live in a moment in which many of our ideas about Jesus and about his Church seem to be destabilized. We have all the statistics. Churches that we remember in our own short life span were filled every Sunday now find themselves empty. The number of those who registered at recent censuses as “no religion” has rapidly increased, especially among those at the age of early child rearing. More and more children are already attending a variety of school models with minimal religious instruction.

This evening we come to celebrate the anniversary of the death of Father Luigi Giussani. I have always been struck by the fact that Giussani had that extraordinary ability to be a teacher of religion in a state school, at a time when there was great cultural tumult in the school system in Italy. He patiently reached out to young people in that almost alien context to be open to the message of Jesus Christ. Many of you here this evening are fruits of that ability. Your lives have been changed. I hope that as a movement and as individuals, you will mirror the commitment of Giussani and reach out in your parishes to help young people to have that experience of lived faith that brought such fulfilment to you.

The Church in Ireland has to develop the ability to be constructively present in a society is not always conducive to faith. The Church will

not attain that by retreating within itself or retreating into the past. It is not about a Church seeking crude power in society. The Church must grow by attracting. It must grow by attracting to the person of Jesus Christ who revealed himself through superabundant mercy. It must do so through listening and patiently accompanying rather than imposing.

That does not mean that the Church becomes simply a listening post or survey taker. I am not a fan of evangelisation by questionnaire. The Church must be welcoming. The Church must reach out. I ask myself why so many of our Churches remain closed for most of the day? When I pass by heavily bolted Churches I ask myself what image of living Church that gives to other passers-by. A heavily bolted Church building is not the sign of reaching out to be a focal point of the saving message of Jesus Christ.



Don Giussani showed that even in the tumult of ideological confusion it is possible to patiently touch the hearts of young people and enable them to see how belief in Jesus Christ can bring an added and richer dimension to their lives and an added contribution to the good of society. We thank God for the mission of Don Giussani and pray that the Church will find new ways to translate such a charism into a living and enthusiastic and prayerful Church today and for tomorrow.