

5th Sunday of Easter

In our second reading St John writes, “If we cannot be condemned by our own conscience we need not be afraid in God’s presence...because we keep his commandments and lead the kind of life that he wants.” He also says, “God is greater than our conscience.”

What do we mean by ‘conscience’? Bl. John Henry Newman is famed for his words, “if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please,—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.” This closing and humorous remark concludes a letter to the Duke of Norfolk addressing issues raised by Pope Pius IX’s document on the subject of religious liberty and the reaction in the Protestant community in England. In fact he is making the point that there cannot really be a contradiction between the voice of conscience, properly understood, and the teaching of the Church. Newman says that the popular understanding of conscience is not that held by Christians, Catholic or Protestant. “When men advocate the rights of conscience, they in no sense mean the rights of the Creator, nor the duty to Him, in thought and deed, of the creature; but the right of thinking, speaking, writing, and acting, according to their judgment or their humour, without any thought of God at all. They do not even pretend to go by any moral rule, but they demand, what they think is an Englishman’s prerogative, for each to be his own master in all things, and to profess what he pleases, asking no one’s leave, and accounting priest or preacher, speaker or writer, unutterably impertinent, who dares to say a word against his going to perdition, if he like it, in his own way.”

For Newman “Conscience is a law of the mind.... [Conscience] is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.” Conscience means a careful weighing of the moral implications of a choice we have to make or perhaps one we have taken. We must always seriously seek what is right and good and try to discern the will of God expressed in divine law assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gifts. We will not always get things right, especially when the issues are complex, but if we are trying to do God’s will then he will not hold this against us.

The story of St Paul illustrates this. He was a devout and zealous Jew. He began by persecuting the new Christian community arresting and imprisoning men and women alike. Our introduction to him is that he stands by looking on with approval as St Stephen is stoned to death. After his vision on the road to Damascus he sees things very differently. He says that he hardly deserves to be called an apostle. No wonder the disciples in Jerusalem hesitated to accept the genuineness of his conversion! His life is now guided by the teaching of Christ and by the faith he shares with the wider Christian community. His previous actions and way of seeing things were objectively wrong but he was acting in good conscience at the time.

Good conscience is not just about being consistent or feeling OK about what we are doing. Equally, as Pope Francis often reminds us and Newman writes, it is not just about following rules or obeying orders. It is about taking decisions seriously – weighing the issues conscientiously and as Christians in the light of our faith, the teaching of the Scriptures and of the Church. We are part of the vine. It is by being part of the vine and receiving from Christ the gift of the Holy Spirit that we are able to discern the will of God and distinguish the voice of conscience from the many other voices whispering advice to us. In a couple of weeks a number of our young people will receive the sacrament of confirmation. We pray that this gift may help them to reach the right decisions as they go through life and we give thanks for the many times the Holy Spirit has helped us at in the decisions of everyday life and especially at the crucial turning points and moments. May we continue to bear the abundant fruit that comes from being true disciples of the Lord.