



October 16, 2022

## **Cardinal Tobin's Synod Mass Homily**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

One Sunday during a political campaign, Winston Churchill (then the prime minister of the United Kingdom) gave a talk in a church in the city of Bristol. The theme of the talk was the evils of alcohol, which surprised some people because Mr. Churchill was known to enjoy more than one adult beverage.

And afterwards, a particularly offended woman came to him in the church hall and said, "Mr. Churchill, you've drunk enough liquor to fill this hall to the ceiling."

And Mr. Churchill raised his eyes to the ceiling and said, "So much to do, and so little time to do it."

I haven't had any adult beverages today, but I feel a bit like Mr. Churchill in celebrating the path that we began a year ago, on a Sunday in October a week after the Holy Father had asked the whole Church to begin a journey.

So much to celebrate. The thousands of participants in the listening sessions across this great archdiocese. The resources that were assembled and shared with dioceses across this world. One of the reasons why we had so many resources in so many languages on our website was because of the richness of this archdiocese. But dioceses in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, in the Caribbean used materials that were made in Newark. The great leaders who unselfishly gave their time and their talent for this journey. The pastors who supported this effort, led by the regional bishops. So much to celebrate, so little time to do it this morning.

So, I thought why don't we just celebrate the questions? Remembering the accomplishments but celebrating the questions.

Let's begin with an uncomfortable question. One that I did not see asked in any of the hundreds of listening sessions that took place over the past 12 months. This question touches on an issue that ought to interest every one of us. And lest you think I'm trying to load the dice by sneaking in my own agenda, I'll quickly identify the source of the question. The passage from Luke's Gospel (Luke 18:8) concludes with a question – an anxious question that's asked by Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Do you remember the question?

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

This question refers not only to Jesus' return at the end of history, when He will come to judge the living and the dead. That question can certainly be asked here and now. Will I find faith in you? In your world? What would the Lord find if He came to earth today? Tragically, he would see so many wars, so much poverty, such inequality. At the same time, he would see achievements, advances in science, modern means and people who are always running, never stopping.

Would He find those who would dedicate time and affection to Him? Would He find people who would put Him first?

And lest we would be tempted to point fingers, let us ask ourselves that question of Jesus. If He came today – and He comes – what would he find in me? In my life? In my heart? If being his disciple was a crime, would there be enough evidence in my life to convict me?

What's important? What are our priorities? It's often a difficult question.

It was a question that really stymied me when I began my service to this archdiocese five and a half years ago. People would say to me "What's your vision?" "What's your plan?" and I would reply, "I don't have one now because I'm going to need to know a little bit more." And yet every day, across the street of Clinton Avenue, in the afternoon a series of file folders will be brought into my room, sometimes about this big, and separated according to topics. "Confidential," "urgent," "bishops," "priests," "deacons," "parishes," "finances," "miscellaneous" – which was always an interesting category. And finally, I began to ask people, "In this big stack, what's important?" And the answer often was "Everything's important."

And, of course, then you would conclude that nothing is important. Because we can't do everything, but we should do something.

What's important? Well, maybe the Gospel can help us think about what's important. Because, after all, haven't we been asking that question, in one form or another, in a particularly intense way over the last year?

Remember the story that Jesus tells about the judge and the widow. Young, scrupulous judge who is probably waiting for the customary bribe and the seemingly powerless woman who has been cheated out of her property – probably all she had to support herself and her children.

We can think a great deal about that contrast, about the judge who respects nobody – he says it, not even God – and the widow who has no other hope than the God who hears her prayers.

But reading the whole Gospel, we cannot help but recognize that not just any kind of prayer merits response. Yes, there is a part that is our effort. We've all heard the story of the fellow who kneels down every night and says "Please God, let me win the lottery. Please God, I promise I will never do it again if I win the lottery."

And the voice from heaven comes and says, "Meet me halfway. Buy a ticket."

But even buying the ticket may not be enough and repeating the same prayer over and over again. Because the story tells us what she was praying for: she was praying for justice. God is not going to give us anything that ultimately harms us.

Jesus says that in another story about prayer. He says, "Which of you parents would give your child a snake if they asked for food? A scorpion if they asked for nourishment? Which of you? Now do you think God is going to give something, even if you ask for it, that's going to hurt you?"

Effective prayer is a stubbornly persistent and persevering act of faith. We're not told how long we must pray to receive God's response, but the answer seems to be as long as it takes. But then the

crucial caveat: our prayer must be for justice. That is for the good that God sees in us and in our world, rather than some illusory goal that is not in our interest.

How do we pray for that? What do we say? What do we do?

I was thinking of Father Bismarck, the rector of this great cathedral, who is not here today because he and about 40 or 50 people from the Archdiocese are visiting the Holy Land. And I went there once, years ago when I was Archbishop of Indianapolis. And people afterwards asked, "What part of the Holy Land impressed you the most?" And we were fortunate enough to see so many things, where Jesus walked, where he talked, where he multiplied the loaves and fishes, where he was raised from the dead. But for me the most striking part was standing in the garden where he prayed the night before he died.

The guide told us that olive trees are peculiar, a part of them almost eternal, and these trees that were surrounding the garden of olives, in one form or another, some of them were there when Jesus was sweating blood and his disciples were asleep. And I thought of the many people I met, who have been in the garden, of suffering, of anguish, of despair.

And I thought of that prayer – which probably is the perfect prayer. How Jesus ends his request. Yes, he asks for what he thinks he wants: If this is Your will, let this cup of suffering pass me by. I don't think I can drink it. But not my will, but Your will be done.

And that's what we've been asking ourselves, and continue to ask ourselves: what does God want from us? How does He want us to live? What's important?

We certainly, in our Synod report that represented the reflection of our communities, list things. We want to continue something like this. We like being asked what's important. We like meeting together. We want the Church to recognize the gifts that are given, particularly in people that can be overlooked. We want this Archdiocese to reach out in welcoming people. All people. We don't want to exclude anyone.

And across these four counties – and I would say, reading reports from other diocese – across this world, there is a concern for young people. Recognizing on the one hand the great challenges that young people face today. And on the other hand, our apparent lack of success in transmitting the faith that has been passed down to us. We've begun to think about what's important, here in the Archdiocese.

So, now a question comes quite naturally: did it make any difference, this last year? Will anything happen? Will anything change? Certainly, something will happen. If we do nothing, if we pretend this never happened, or if the questions are too uncomfortable for us to answer, something will happen. If our decisions are not in symphony with the Will of God, something will happen: We will build a house on sand, and the house will ultimately collapse.

So, what's next? Here in the Archdiocese, we are going to look at that report that's been on our website in a number of different languages. And we're going to ask each other, what's missing in here? We're going to ask each other what can we do right now, right here in the Archdiocese of Newark?

We want to continue this process - well let's make sure that every parish is equipped to do that. Let's make sure that every parish has a parish council that is open and prepared and eager to lead the questioning and the planning in that expression of faith that is their community.

What sort of concrete plan can we make now for our young people? What does a parish need from the Archdiocese central offices in order to reach young people and to involve them and welcome them? Whom are we excluding from our parish – either actively or passively? And rather than simply being a welcoming parish, which is based on the idea that people are going to show up, let's go out of ourselves and reach those who are not there.

And be ready to change your plans.

You might remember, if you were here a year ago, I said the Holy Father is asking us to do this reflection in our archdiocese that will eventually be part of a reflection at the continental level, which will eventually be considered by the Synod of Bishops in 2023.

This morning, he changed the plan. This morning at St. Peter's Square, he announced that there will be two sessions to the Synod – one next year and one in 2024. And the fault is yours, because he said "The first phase of the Synod has been taking place across the world with efforts of listening and discernment. The fruits of this synodal process that has just begun are many, but in order to reach full maturity, it is necessary not to be in a hurry." Tell that to people on the Parkway.

To have a more extended time of discernment, the Holy Father has decided that this synodal assembly will take place in two sessions. Why does he do this? He says "I trust that this decision can foster the understanding of synodality, which is more than a meeting, it's a way of being Church. And understanding synodality as a constitutive element of the Church. Something that the Church absolutely needs to learn and practice in order to be Church. In order to help everyone live it as a journey of brothers and sisters who bear witness to the joy of the Gospel."

So, let's go back to that first question. If Jesus comes today, will He find faith? Most of us, if we're honest, will say "I hope so." But we pray that prayer that a concerned parent prayed in the Gospel of Mark, when he was told by Jesus "If you believe, your son will be cured." And that dad blurted out, "I do believe! Help my unbelief."

And for that part of us that is cynical or tired or distracted, we pray today that the Lord will hold up our arms, like Aaron and Hur did for Moses, so that we'll have the effort to continue this journey learning from each other, taking the decisions we need to take, and sharing the riches of our Archdiocese with the Church across the world.