

Homily for 28th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2011

Everyone is talking about the death of Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple. His influence on technology has been extraordinary. His gift for design enabled very sophisticated technology to enter into the mass market. His company, Apple, became an icon of the successful business. And everyone is quoting his Commencement address delivered on June 12, 2005 at Stanford University. It is a very interesting talk, inspiring for his listeners, in which he reflects on his life and his own coming death through cancer. I just want to quote a small paragraph from it.

“Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”

He was very much a child of the 1960's. That era was characterised by a suspicion of all authority, especially institutional authority. We understand what he is saying here, I am sure. To lead an authentic life a person has to discover the truth of what is given to us from outside and internalise it. As adults we cannot just blindly do what others tell us. That is good and necessary for a child. But to be mature one has to tackle the task of being true to oneself, while building on the past. In that sense Jesus would agree with him. Jesus tried hard to get the Jewish leaders to understand that the mere external adherence to the Law of Moses. It had to be written on the heart, as the book of Deuteronomy said (6:6). But we would part company with him in rejecting the wisdom of those who have gone before us. We do not have to recreate the world from scratch.

All this to lead into dogma. Ironically, Apple's success has depended in large part because of the strict dogma of it's business plan. When you buy an Apple product you enter into a whole technological ecosystem that limits a user to what is allowed by Apple.

So I want to say a bit about the Creed. Creeds present a **given** from revelation, Christian dogma. We are introducing the new translation of the Nicene Creed this weekend. Creeds are not catechisms. They do not contain all Christian doctrine. They are a response by the Church at a particular time to clarify what we believe about certain issues. They usually arise because of some controversy. They are called symbols of faith. They are intended to be a safeguard against differing interpretations of scripture.

Our Nicene Creed came as a result of two early Councils of the Church in the fourth century. And it had a political as well as religious purpose. After Constantine became Roman emperor and converted to Christianity he found that disputes amongst Christians about the Trinity were jeopardising the unity of the empire as well as the Church. So he summoned the bishops together. Politics and religion were very much intertwined. The upshot of the discussions that century is the Creed we say even today.

I just want to point out a couple of the changes to the text. The first and apparently simple one is the change from saying “We believe” to “I believe.” When first written in the fourth century it used “we believe” in the Greek text. It was a statement of unity in faith by the warring bishops. When Latin became the language of the Church this phrase was translated as “we believe” also. But then after the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century it became “I believe”. The reason was that with the rejection of all things Papal and Catholic by the reformers, the Catholic Church reacted by demanding an oath of allegiance from priests and bishops. Part of this oath was the Nicene Creed. So instead of being a proclamation of a common faith the creed became a personal affirmation of one's affiliation with Rome. That Latin translation remains to this day.

However, when it was being translated into English after the Second Vatican Council the translators had considerable freedom. They chose to use the earlier form, “We believe”. This reflected the theology of that Council which set out to be pastoral not confrontational. It also espoused a theology of the Church as “People of God” rather than an institution which demanded allegiance. With the newly translated Missal we begin to use this year the requirement was that there be a strict translation of the Latin. Therefore, the phrase becomes “I believe”. In the context of the Eucharist where we are confessing our faith, not asserting our opposition to other religion, it probably does not matter which is used.

The other obvious change is the clumsy word “consubstantial”. At present we have been saying “of one being”. That is as accurate a translation of the meaning of the Latin original as you might find. But again a literal translation seems to have required a transliteration of the Latin word “*consubstantialem*”. This all appears esoteric. But it seems that one of the reasons for the change here is that the word in question was at the heart of those early controversies about the nature of the Trinity and the relationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The translators wanted to keep that obvious link. It is all fascinating history to read about those old disputes for those interested. There are other changes you will notice. One thing that has not changed, however, is the use of the exclusive “for us men and our salvation”. It's a boy thing!

Whatever about all that, we say the Creed at Mass as our assent to the Word of God we have just pondered in the Liturgy of the Word. We express our unity in faith. We proclaim a symbol of faith that unites us with all those Christians throughout history who have sought to follow Jesus Christ. Creeds are a statement of faith but each generation has to make it their own. We do that by asking questions of it and internalising its truth and writing it on our hearts. It is prayer. It is an act of worship.

Fr Graham