

Sunday Homily

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

9 MAY 2021

YEAR B

“This is my commandment,
that you love one another as I have loved you.”

John 15:12

Illustration

Since 1965 the Royal Air Force’s Aerobatic Team – the Red Arrows – have completed over four thousand displays. If you’ve seen them, you’ll know that the breathtaking precision of their manoeuvres is an excellent antidote to thinking the world is full of bungling idiots. They are part of a tradition of highly skilled airmen and women whose proficiency and poise in high-risk situations are a good reminder of what human beings, given the right training and experience, are capable of.

It is more than sixty years since another group carried out an airborne feat of amazing precision and boldness during World War II. The attacks on German dams on 17th May 1943 used a specially developed “bouncing bomb”. The dams had been identified as prime targets for the Allied Forces, but the technical problems were thought to make it impossible, until engineer Barnes Wallis invented a drum-shaped bomb capable of spinning and skimming on the surface of water. An accurate drop could bypass the dam’s protection, but to pull this off from a height of only 60 feet, while flying at 240 miles per hour, required the bang-on precision and nerves of steel shown by members of Number 617 Squadron – or the Dambusters, as they’re better known.

Gospel Teaching

Jesus says something which is both astonishing and moving in today’s reading from John: “I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends.” But something else he says might take us aback: “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Now we don’t tend to think of friends as issuing rules, and we don’t think of friendship as dependent upon keeping them.

So let’s think about the Red Arrows again for a moment. To get to that level of precision and skill takes years of training – and of course training requires obedience. So with such high stakes you can bet that fighter and aerobatic pilots take obedience extremely seriously – because they know their lives depend upon it. Of course we’re fine, down here on terra firma. Since we don’t have earth spinning towards us at hundreds of miles an hour, we don’t have to obey commands in order to save our lives. Or do we?

Throughout the Gospels Jesus spells it out with stark warnings and parables – the slave who fails to use his talents, the wicked vineyard tenants, the unproductive fig tree – they all end up cast out of heaven because they disobeyed God’s commandments. So in fact our eternal lives also depend upon obedience – the stakes could hardly be higher. And it would be a poor friend who didn’t do anything in his power to save our lives – even if that meant laying down the law.

Application

One problem we, in our modern, individualistic age, have is that we confuse obedience with spineless submission. But it depends who we’re obeying and why. We don’t think of the Red Arrows as being spineless in obeying orders during training or manoeuvres. We admire them for their dedication and discipline and understand that, when it’s a matter of life and death, obedience is essential.

Another problem is that we tend to think it’s dull to be obedient. The answer to this dilemma can be found in today’s reading from 1 John. We hear that God’s commandments are “not burdensome”, and get a tantalising glimpse of obedience leading to faith which, in turn, leads to victory.

A third problem is that we don’t think we’re very good at obedience, so we give up before we’ve tried. What’s at the root of this crisis of confidence? Perhaps it’s because obedience involves a deep faith commitment. Søren Kierkegaard said: “It is so hard to believe because it is so hard to obey.” The deeper we go into the Christian life, the more we find that faith and obedience are inextricably intertwined. Because obedience is not a sideline to faith, but a key element of it – it is no less, in fact, than faith in action.

Obedience is not simply saying “yes” to everything, but making a deeper commitment to live in faith and, above all, to obey Jesus’ commandment to love one another. It’s a skill like any other. In order for it to work for us as individuals we have to make it our own, incorporate it into the very fabric of our lives, and that takes training. But as our eternal lives depend on it, the stakes could hardly be higher.