

Thanksgiving Mass: Investiture of Cardinal Brislin  
26<sup>th</sup> Sunday A

01 October 2023 Rome Vatican

Bishop S. Sipuka

As we celebrate this Thanksgiving Mass for the inauguration of Archbishop Brislin as Cardinal, Today's readings invite us to consider the importance of harmonising our words with our actions. If we claim to be upright according to the first reading, then this must be clear in our acts of being just and in avoiding committing sin. If we claim to be in Christ, we must not be competitive but think of other people's interests. And finally, according to the Gospel, we are not to pay lip service to God but to do God's will.

So Cardinal Brislin, if you were looking for a hint of what is expected of you as Cardinal, at least according to today's readings, it is that you should obey God in word and actions and inspire others to do the same. Some of us are great with promises and rhetoric but disappear when it comes to action, as we heard in today's Gospel parable. His father asks him to go and work in his vineyard, and he says, "I am on my way," and never goes. And he says the same to the second, and he straight away says no, but later on, he has a change of mind and goes.

If I may make a presumption, we are a bit of both sons. The reason why God creates Cardinals, well through the Church, is to lead us, first through their example and sometimes through their prophetic challenge to have consistency between what we say and do so that between word and action, there is harmony, between what we say and do there is coherence and between what we profess and practice there is agreement.

I am tempted to generalise the application of this gospel because it is hitting closer to home. Its context is the conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders of his time. He was addressing the Cardinals of his time who saw nothing that needed to change in their lives; they had it all because they knew the law and the tradition.

They found it offensive even to suggest that there was something wrong with them, worse still, to suggest that prostitutes and tax collectors were in a better relationship with God than them; this was preposterous.

What Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders would be equivalent to saying that paedophiles, drug addicts, rapists, murderers, corrupt people, adulterers and whoever you consider most sinful are securing a place in heaven because they convert, while the Cardinals descend into perdition, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth for their lack of conversion.

Cardinal 1 and 2, this Gospel is addressed to us religious leaders who may be tempted to think that we have it all because we are religious leaders. The humbling reminder from Jesus is that even as religious leaders, we have a lot to learn from those we lead, including those we consider sinful. This is so because spiritually, no one can claim to have arrived, not even the Cardinals because we are all on the way, being inspired and encouraged by each other and totally dependent on the grace of God.

As the Synod on sodality begins, there is a proclaimed excitement about it, but there is also a tension that we feel but dare not talk about, especially here in Rome, so I am not talking about it. Suffice it to say that a good part of the tension is due to an attitude that questions the value of talking to everybody through the Synod when everything is clear about the Church and its teaching. What else do we need to hear because everything has been revealed and set, except if we want to change the nature of the Church and its doctrine? So the cynicism about the Synod goes.

The suggestion that God was talking through the unknown people like John Baptists, the poor, the sinners and signs of the time infuriated the religious leaders of Jesus' time to the point that they got rid of him in the way that is described in today's second reading, death on a cross. The bitterness and infuriation that we hear about in relation to the Synod is due in no small measure among some of us to the unacceptable suggestion that there is still something more to learn about the Church. And for this reason, we have some religious leaders who are saying NO to the Synod.

Providence has brought us to Rome just as the Synod is about to start. Let us pray that those religious leaders among us who say NO to the Synod will, like the second son who later saw the wisdom of his father and decided to go and work in the vineyard that they also know the wisdom of our present successor of Peter to lead the Church in a Synodal way and work *Cum Petro et Sub Petro*.

We pray that those of us saying Yes to the Synod may be different from the first son who eagerly agreed to the father's request and did nothing afterwards. Much as we admit that we are not certain about where the Synod is leading, let us believe that Christ, who promised never to allow the gates of hell to prevail over the Church, with Peter and under Peter, is leading his Church to some renewal.

Much as the context of today's Gospel suggests that its message is directed to religious leaders, the fact that in this celebration, we have not only Cardinals and bishops but also religious and the laity means that it is also addressed to them as well. That is why it is being read on a Sunday. Let me conclude by proposing

The guest preacher in a Church was really getting the congregation moving. Near the end of his sermon, he said, "This church has really got to walk", to which someone at the back yelled, "Let her walk preacher!" The preacher then said, "If this church is going to go, it's got to get up and run" to which someone again yelled with gusto, "Let her run preacher!"

Feeling the surge of the church, the preacher then said with even louder gusto, "If this church is going to go, it's got to really fly" and once again with ever greater gusto, someone yelled, "Let her fly preacher, let her fly." The preacher then seized the moment and stated with the greatest gusto, "If this church is really going to fly it's going to need money!" Now, someone at the back mumbled, "Let her walk, preacher, let her walk." (Ikwuka 2021 Loc7281)

It is not enough for us to profess our faith enthusiastically and, like the second son later, do nothing about it; our verbal yes must be followed by action. Like the second son, we can take joy and even pride in our commitment to prayer and performance of rituals but be stingy in our submission and obedience in our daily practical life. In this case, our "yes" has become a "no."

We can enthusiastically respond with a big yes at questions about commitment asked at our baptism, confirmation, religious profession and ordination but in life allow other values and influences to shape our lives than by the vows we made. In such cases, our enthusiastic yesses have become noooos.

We can verbally commit to love and be faithful to one person at a marriage ceremony but in our practical life let other relationships and acquaintances have priority. Our initial "yes" has become a "no." We

can make great commitments to the Lord at Lent or at Easter, and when the time for follow-through comes, offer all kinds of rationalisations to justify our failure to act on our commitments. Our initial “yes” can become a “no.”. Children in their innocence do not hold back in challenging us about this inconsistency. “But Mommy you said”, only if we can learn from their challenge.

We also see this verbal YES becoming a NO applying to our political leaders. As we know back at home, our political leaders are saying all the right yesses, a better life for all, batho pele, right to this and that, best constitution in the world, but in real life, you know, what it is, it is a big NO.

What is painful is that this NO remains forever because it is presented as a YES, and so when you challenge it you appear unreasonable. For this reason, it has been said that the NO of apartheid was better because it was not camouflaged as a YES, and we fought it for what it was. Our present NO in South Africa is that it is disguised as a YES.

The NO to life of dignity of the poor people is said by the people we know, the people we once held in high regard and trusted for their sacrificial life, the people we have voted for. With elections around the corner, big promises of YES will be made, which are only a trojan horse for NO. It requires the wisdom of a Cardinal to point out the NO hidden in a Yes, and that is why, through the Church, God has given us a second Cardinal.

While the son who initially said NO to his father is better portrayed than the first Son, both sons leave much to be desired. Compared to the second son, the first son is better but could still be better. His behaviour was a NO and YES, and the behaviour of the second son was a YES and NO; both are inconsistent, even though the inconsistency of the first son is a better evil because it ended with a yes.

It is with the 3rd Son that we read about in the second reading that we get the ideal and consistent behaviour of YES.

His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.

Jesus, unlike the first son, did not say NO and YES, and unlike the second son, he did say YES and NO. Like his mother, Mary, it was a constant YES, even to the point of shameful death on a cross. It is to this type of YES that we are invited, a continuous YES, a YES that make our word and our action to correspond.

In the light of today's readings, Cardinal Brislin, it appears that one of your mapped-out tasks is to help us always say yes to God, starting with the leadership of the Church, which can succumb to the temptation of defining once and for all God's ways and shut its eyes from perceiving and responding to God's presence and operation and responding with YES.

You are entrusted with the task of inviting and challenging our political and civil authorities and those wielding economic power who are insidious and cunning, presenting their NO as YES at the expense of the poor. You are to encourage and persuade us in our NO disposition to God innate from original sin to say YES again through conversion to Christ. Above all, you should walk with us for a consistent YES instead of fluctuating YES and NO.