

Thank you Colman wherever you are

Many years ago I was present at the First Mass of a newly ordained priest. This was in the 1950's, prior to Vatican II. And the priest chosen to deliver the homily at that Mass was Fr. Colman Gallacher, a Franciscan, a ruddy Scotsman – a belated vocation who had worked until he was about 35 in the shipyards of Glasgow. Had he been a Protestant fundamentalist he could have made a fortune. By that I mean he could hold audiences in sway, was an extrovert, indeed a real showman. Before he was even ordained I watched him as a seminarian serve Mass at a special event and in his mere shifting the Missal from one side of the altar to the other and bearing the cruets and genuflecting – he upstaged the celebrant; his movements were equivalent to a ballet.

And yet he was quite virile, spoke a Scots brogue – which he could modulate depending on his audience. Even as a seminarian he founded the St. Margaret of Scotland Guild as a fundraiser for his seminary education and other good works. I have heard descriptions of his arrival at train stations where the Guild was having meetings greeted by skirling bagpipes and striding majestically down the railroad platform amid scores of Scots/Irish admirers.

And I still remember his sermon on that day of the young priest's First Mass. In his Scot's accent he spoke of a day and night on the Western Front in the First World War. A Scots company had advanced into No Man's Land – too far; and found itself cut off from its own lines. Encirclement was imminent; aggravated by the fact that the company's portable telephone went dead. They could send no call for help. Volunteers tried to make their way back but never returned.

Finally an old sergeant offered to trace the broken wire to splice it. He crawled out of the company's perimeter. Minutes went by, a half hour, an hour; suddenly the phone came alive. The company was able to gain help, was recovered and saved. And as the officer in charge followed his survivors across the battlefield he saw the old sergeant, dead in a shell hole, pinching between his forefinger and thumb the broken ends of the wire.

Colman brought his story to an end saying, "That's what a priest does; keeps alive the line between a bewildered human race and a God of grace - in the midst of a world that too often is very much like No Mans Land."

The image held everyone's attention – so much so that one might forget what it means liturgically. It means that when you are confused by a biblical image such as Jonah's being swallowed by a whale, it is the preacher's role to reconnect you to the applicable sense of that story, to reveal that Jonah is you! and that you should consider in what ways you have been swallowed by a whale, by fear, prejudice, obstinacy, a reluctance to engage in life, to flee from a crisis. It means applying the images of Scripture to your life and society's life, delivering you from a suffocating existence to life regained.

Aside from oneself, might not one even say that our own nation, our world has been swallowed by a whale? It's the role of the Church's ministry to awaken us to that predicament and deposit us upon a shore whence we can begin to breathe again – as the Christ-like beings God meant us to BE.

Geoff Wood