

Sermon 25 June 2023

1 Timothy 4:11-16 Matthew 10:26-33

'Tom Brown's School Days' was a famous British novel. It was made into a movie that became a box-office hit. Tom Brown was a popular boy who attended a boarding school in England. At night he slept with about a dozen other boys on one of the school's dormitories. Whatever Tom said or did always made an impact on what the other boys in the school said or did.

One day, a new boy came to the school. When it came for bed that night, the new boy knelt down beside his bed to say his prayers. A few of the boys began to snicker. A couple of others began to laugh and joke. One even threw a shoe at the kneeling boy.

That night Tom didn't go to sleep right away. He lay awake thinking about what had happened to the newcomer. He also began to think about his mother and the prayers she taught him to say each night before going to bed, prayers he had not said since coming to school.

The next night several of boys in the dormitory were looking forward to poking fun at the new boy again. When bedtime came, however, something unexpected happened. When the new boy knelt down to say his prayers, Tom knelt down beside his bed also. When the other boys saw Tom kneeling and praying, they desisted from carrying out their plans.

That simple but so very meaningful little episode from 'Tom Brown's School Days' illustrates in a dramatic and poignant way what Jesus had in mind when he said in today's gospel, *'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.'*

It also illustrates one of the reasons why Jesus made this statement. It's because bearing witness to God, to our faith, can have a profound impact on others. Conversely, not bearing witness can also have an effect, albeit in a very different way.

Someone once said that every Christian occupies some kind of pulpit and preaches some kind of sermon every day. What does that mean? Simply, that people will be influenced in some way by what we say, but more importantly, far more importantly, by what we do. This takes on particular significance in light of the rather negative perception of a proportion of the population towards those who proclaim to be Christian.

I recently alluded to this negative perception as revealed in a survey carried out a few years ago. One of the words used on a frequent basis was 'hypocrites.' In other words, our actions did not reinforce or reflect our words. Unfortunately, this is an all too-common failing amongst those who claim the label of 'Christian.' I believe this is precisely what Jesus is alluding to in our gospel reading. He calls us to be obedient to him, and that obedience

entails ensuring our actions reflect what we profess to believe; that our actions reflect the commands given to us through Christ.

What are those commands? You can all answer that – to sum up in one sentence, very simply to be kind to one another. And as we all know, one of the most effective ways of fulfilling this is through humble service.

There is the story of Sami Jo, who was a missionary in Cambodia during their civil war in the 1970's. She was a skilled and highly educated physical therapist and used her ability to work with soldiers who had lost limbs in the war. She was there to serve God. She was there for God to use her abilities to help amputees and through her skill to share the gospel. At least that's what she thought.

Then, she was put on the assignment of lancing boils and bandaging sores. No physical therapy, just boils. No great need for her skill set, just bandaging open wounds. But through this humbling experience, Sami Jo learned about obedience. She learned she wasn't serving God for any particular skills she might have but rather she was serving God through being obedient to him.

In our gospel reading, Jesus calls us to be obedient to him, and through that obedience we can be a positive influence in our community. In our opening story, Tom Brown was obedient to his mother's instruction and example of nightly prayers. He in turn set an example and so was able to be a positive influence on his fellow students.

Albert Einstein said, *'Setting an example is not the main means of influencing others, it is the only means.'* I refer also to our first reading in which Paul says, *'Be an example to all in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, your purity.'* I guess that says it all.

I want to finish by relating an experience I had a couple of years ago. I was asked to provide a reference for someone who was applying to be a volunteer for this particular charity. The last question was, Why do you think this person is applying for this role? So I put that question to the person involved. His answer was, 'Life has been good to me and I just want to give something back. Besides, it's very much part of what I believe.'

If we all carried that ethic into our everyday lives, not only are we being obedient to God, we are also bearing witness to our faith. And if enough of us do that, then we will surely be a positive influence on our wider community.

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