

11th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Let us begin our reflections by thinking about our parish community. A number of you have spent most of your adult life here building a faith-community for yourself, for your children, and for the district. You will have many memories of the joys and pains that have gone into this commitment, and the rest of us who have been welcomed into this parish and are now enjoying it want to express to you our thanks. In a special way we want to thank those in our community who have given their life to us and now are experiencing the weakness, disability and perhaps disappointments that age or ill-health can bring. Today's responsorial psalm is directed especially to you. It is a prayer that your spirit will remain strong as you continue to be grateful to God for all his blessings:

'It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to make music to your name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your truth in the watches of the night. The just will flourish like the palm-tree and grow like a Lebanon cedar. Planted in the house of the Lord they will flourish in the courts of our God, still bearing fruit when they are old, still full of sap, still green, to proclaim that the Lord is just. In him, my rock, there is no wrong' (Psalm 92:1-2,12-15)

The psalmist invites us to trust that God is filling us with the life of his Spirit, for our own sakes and for the sake of this community. Please God in your retirement, you have time for prayer now which was difficult to find in your more active years. Please remember that your prayer is your greatest contribution to the community, for it is especially in your periods of prayer, however dark and empty they might feel, that the kingdom of God is entering all our lives most powerfully.

In today's gospel, Jesus asks the question: What is the kingdom of God like? We know what life is like at many levels, but what would life be like if we were to live it in full communion with God? What happens to people and to society when we are in tune with God? His answer is very enlightening. We might be inclined to start from ourselves and wonder what we should do to cooperate with God and bring about change in ourselves and in our world. That is a good question, and there is certainly a place for searching out an answer to it. But it is not where Jesus puts the focus.

He makes it perfectly clear that what we do is secondary. If we want to know what the kingdom of God is like we need to focus our attention on what God is doing. Jesus goes to the farm for both his illustrations. Sure, farmers need to clear the ground. They need to fence off the paddock. They need to sow the seed. But the miracle of the harvest goes on in the dark soil, day and night, even when the farmer is asleep or away from his property. If we want to know what life would be like if we were in tune with God, we must be careful not to judge by what we are doing. Rather, we should focus our attention on the wonder of what God is doing in our lives.

In his second example, Jesus draws our attention to the tiny mustard seed, and to the huge shrub in the garden. Who would have believed that the shrub was all hidden in the seed? If we want to know what life would be like if we lived in communion with God, we must be careful not to judge by appearances. Rather we must trust in God and hope for the harvest which only God can bring about.

Since so much of our culture stresses the importance of self-reliance, and imposes upon us the idea that the more independent we are the more secure we are, the lesson Jesus is teaching can

be very hard to receive. This is especially so in the area of prayer. We tend to focus on what we are experiencing, and when we experience only darkness and emptiness, we forget that a lot is going on in the dark soil. It is God who is acting in prayer, not us, and it is God who is working the miracle and who will produce the harvest. James McAuley, perhaps our greatest Australian lyric poet, wrote (from A Letter to John Dryden):

‘Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,
cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, who walk within the fire
of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land.
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense
of questioning, they do not know from whence.
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark.
It works unseen like radium in the dark’.

It is in prayer that we live in communion with God. It is in prayer that the kingdom of God enters our world. Certainly, we need to fence off the paddock. We need to create an environment where we are not so busy and distracted that there is no space left for prayer - but we must know that prayer is something that God is doing in us. The fruits of prayer are as surprising and outside our control as the shrub that emerges from the tiny seed, or the harvest that happens while we are not watching. Prayer is essentially an expression of faith. Some excellent advice on prayer is given us by Ruth Burrows, a contemporary English woman writer:

‘What God wants from us above all is trust, that trust which is our profoundest homage to him. He wants us to believe utterly in his will to load us with blessings. He wants us to let him love us. Most spiritual people learn to see his loving providence in the events of their lives, hidden though it may be, but it is a different matter when it comes to their interior states. They find it extremely difficult to believe that he is there, offering his love to them in their present, seemingly unsatisfactory prayer. This absence of all feeling, all high stirrings, this absence of the sublime leads them to think, even if secretly, that something has gone wrong, that they are spiritual failures.

‘Rarely is their distress due to love of God, rather it is because it makes them feel so poor and good-for-nothing. They flee from this state and, in so doing, escape from God. Perhaps they throw themselves into self-sacrificing activity for others, sparing themselves in nothing. Now they are doing something for God! Or maybe a rigid form of conduct, avoiding all possible risk of failing in obligation, may be the channel of escape. It may be possible to work up some sort of fantasy prayer which deceives themselves if not others.

‘What God is asking is that they should accept to be loved utterly not because they are good but because he is good. They want to earn his love. They hate to feel they do nothing for him and must receive love as a free gift. The purest love of God accepts one’s being just as a receptacle to receive this outpouring of God’s love, and the more poor and wretched we are the more we are fitted for that ... True prayer is a giving of self to God, an opening of the self to God, not a seeking to feel God and his action.’(*Before the Living God: prayer and practice* , pages 100-101).

If when we make space for prayer, we find ourselves in deep darkness, let us remember the seed lying in the ground, waiting for the time of the harvest. Darkness is normal. Let us have the courage to stay in silence asking God to continue to love and bless us there. There is no finer contribution that any of us can make to the building of this parish community, for it is prayer that opens us up to the miracle of God's grace and to the wonderful harvest which only God can produce.