

Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

While Jesus was sharing the last meal he would have with his friends before his death, he said to them: 'Trust in God still and trust in me'(John 14:1). Today's Gospel is the third in a series of three exceptionally powerful scenes in which Mark, drawing on the memories of Peter, is encouraging his fellow Christians to keep on trusting God, to keep on trusting Jesus even though things can seem hopeless.

In the first of the three scenes we see the disciples in a boat out on the lake, battling a storm. Jesus is with them, but he is asleep and seemingly unaware of their predicament. They wake him and he calms the raging waters. Life can be a bit like that for us, too. Mark is telling us that even though everything around us seems to be in chaos, and even though our prayers seem to be unanswered, Jesus is really with us. He knows our situation and he will respond to our cry for help in the way that God knows is best. Jesus offers us a share in his peace even when everything around us seems to be in chaos. Jesus is saying to us: 'Trust in God still and trust in me.'

In the second scene Jesus and his disciples come to the land of the Gadarenes. A deranged man comes running towards Jesus from the tombs, howling, hacking himself with stones and shouting out to Jesus to leave him alone. The chaos is no longer just outside. Now it is within. He is a symbol of us all when we are collapsing inside. When our heart is broken and we seem to be losing our connection with people and with events. Perhaps we might imagine that we can cope when the storm is raging outside us, but who imagines that we can manage when the storm is inside? Once again Jesus brings calm – this time to the man's spirit. We are being asked to keep on trusting God even when our inner world is in turmoil. Jesus is saying to us: 'Trust in God still and trust in me.'

Saint Paul once wrote that nothing can come between us and the love of God that is in Jesus (Romans 8:39). After these two scenes perhaps we might be willing to believe him. But there remains the most profound mystery of all – death. When death faces us, or those we love, it threatens everything that we have learned to cherish and everything we think we have understood. The question arises in our hearts: 'Can death separate us from God's love?' This is the subject of Mark's third scene, presented to us by the church in today's gospel. The little girl is twelve years old. The woman's life has been draining away for twelve years. Twelve, the number of the constellations in the zodiac, is a symbol of completeness under the heavens. The lessons contained here are of universal significance.

When the little girl is restored to life, we are not expected to hope that if we trust enough we can avoid death forever. Death is a part of our human existence. Though we have prayed for or heard of people who have been miraculously healed, we know that we must all eventually die. The aim of today's gospel is not to encourage us to trust that Jesus will come and take us by the hand, or take those we love by the hand, and restore us back to this life, even though that is what we might want for ourselves and for those we love. Our trust is that when we come to die, whatever our age and whatever the circumstances, Jesus will certainly come and take us by the hand and take us through to the life for which we are created, the life of eternal communion in love with God and with all those we love. Physical death is a fact and we must all pass through it. Mark is assuring us that physical death need not be real death, for it need not separate us from

God, the source of all life.

When Jesus himself was dying he entrusted his life-spirit to his Father. His resurrection is our assurance that Jesus' trust was not in vain. We know in faith that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God that we experience in Jesus. Jesus is saying to us: 'Trust in God still and trust in me.'

There is another lesson in today's gospel. The sickness suffered by the woman meant that she was ostracised from the community. She was untouchable. She would not have been allowed to mix with the congregation when people gathered for prayer. Jairus, the father of the little girl, belonged to another strata of society: he was one of the synagogue officials. Yet Jesus not only allows her to touch him, but he points her out to Jairus as a model of belief.

There is so much that we can learn from each other and the best lessons are learned from the simple, ordinary, salt of the earth people who are in touch with the realities of life and who live their lives without pretence and without show. Jesus wants us to learn from children. In fact he said that unless we let go our pseudo-mature pretensions and regain some of the simplicity and straightforwardness of a needy child, we will never understand God's love and never be part of the community of Jesus' real disciples. Jesus wants us to learn from the poor whose hearts have not been cluttered by possessions. He wants us to learn from those whose hearts are in mourning because they do not escape from their real feelings and they dare to depth the pain that is part of everyone's life. He wants us to learn from those who do the truth in love, but who do it gently, without trying to control others or to bring pressure on them to conform.

He wants us to learn from those whose lives are uncomfortable because they thirst for justice and are willing to put themselves out in their solidarity with the oppressed. He wants us to learn from those who understand the weakness of their fellow humans and are compassionate towards them. He wants us to learn from those whose hearts have been purified by their willingness to allow the fire of God's love to burn away the dross that can so easily build up in and choke up our hearts. He wants us to learn from those people who instead of causing division by rigidly protecting their own positions, work for peace and harmony by respecting others, however different, and by including them. Finally – to conclude our reflection on the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10) – Jesus wants us to learn, as in today's gospel, from those who, in their suffering, continue to trust and to reach out to the one who is the source of all true healing. Jesus is saying to us: 'Trust in God still and trust in me.'

So, whatever our present situation, we do not have to cope on our own. Like the distraught father, or the sick woman, let us come to Jesus and in trust plead with him for a share of the deep peace which he experienced because of the profound communion in love which he had with God, for it is true that nothing, not even death, can come between us and the love of God in Christ Jesus our lord.