

Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

There is a lot that we can learn from today's gospel. Jesus comes back to Nazareth where he had spent the first thirty or so years of his life. He had been away only a short time and news had filtered back that people were looking on him as a prophet. He already had a reputation for healing and for speaking words that drew people into communion with God. This astonished them, for he had seemed so ordinary during all those years. His mother was still living in the village, as were members of his extended family. Joseph had come to Nazareth when Jesus was a child. There was plenty of work for a carpenter, as Herod was building his headquarters at Sepphoris, a walk of only three or four kilometres from Nazareth. Jesus has continued in his father's trade. When Jesus addressed the people of the village in the synagogue, they were impressed by his wisdom, but they could not bring themselves to believe that the local carpenter could be a prophet. During his stay, Jesus did heal a few sick people, but Mark tells us that he was not able to work any miracles there. In other words nothing he said or did was accepted as a revelation of God. Their lack of faith amazed him.

In the light of the gospel, we might ask ourselves two questions. Firstly, why do we fail to see the goodness of God in others? Why do we reject people? Why do we speak ill of others, and put them down? And secondly, how should we react when others fail to recognise us, humiliate us, judge us harshly, and refuse to accept the love we want to offer them?

The people of Nazareth rejected Jesus because they saw him as being so 'ordinary'. Are there very ordinary people among our acquaintances whom we ignore? Do we look down on some people? Do we find ourselves spreading stories about them to make ourselves seem smart and get a laugh? Do we see their faults so clearly that we don't even bother to think that they might have something to say? Do we write some people off because of their manner, or their race, or their lack of intelligence, or their work, or their obvious limitations? If I find myself putting other people down, I need to reflect on a number of matters.

Firstly, do I realise how much I owe others for any good that there is in me? There is no place for pride, only gratitude to our parents, teachers and friends, and all those who have encouraged and helped us. As Paul says: 'It is by God's grace that I am what I am' (1Corinthians 15:10).

Secondly, if I took the trouble to notice my own limitations, weaknesses, and straight-out sinfulness, then surely that should teach me a bit of humility, and help me feel some compassion towards others in their weakness. How do I know what opportunities others have had? How do I know what feelings they are trying to cope with? Judgment should be left to God. If I really love someone, then perhaps I can assist them with appropriate advice and even correction. But if I don't really admire and love them, then I had better stay right out and leave the intended help to someone who will do it properly, and with love.

Not everything about us is as it should be. There are things that we need to change. But that won't happen until we accept ourselves for who we are with all our faults and limitations, and then humbly plead with God to help us become what he wants us, and is gracing us, to be. It is stupid to think that to be worthwhile and to be loved we need to be powerful, or important, or attractive, or rich, or good looking, or successful. We find it hard to accept weakness of any kind in ourselves, and that is one reason why we criticise the weaknesses of others. And if we have

the humility to admit our own limitations, then we can open our eyes and look around, and see others in their limitations as ordinary people whom God creates minute by minute. They have their faults - but there is nothing particularly smart about our noticing them, and we are very foolish to put them down because of them. It is no credit to the people of Nazareth that they failed to see what was beautiful in Jesus because of their narrow vision, and it is no credit to us that we fail to see the good in people because we are too busy looking at their weaknesses.

Thirdly, do I realise that by putting other people down, I am showing that I fail to know God? Have I forgotten that God has made each of us in his own image - which means that he graces everyone to draw close to him and to communicate with him in prayer. I am not saying that everyone is in fact drawing near to God and communicating with God in prayer, but it is certainly not our right to judge them, and if we were wise we would love them as best we can, for only love can help any of us become who we are able to be.

Let us turn now to our second question. What about when others humiliate us? Let us remember that Jesus was humiliated and 'treated with contempt'(Mark 9:12). Today's gospel is an example. He came to love, to heal, to forgive and to give people hope. And look how they received him - and these were the people he grew up with, and went to school with, and worked with. It is even clearer in his passion. There we see him giving his life in love and yet he is mocked by the soldiers (Mark 15:18-19), and by the religious leaders (Mark 15:31-32). Even those who happened to be passing by and knew nothing about him were making fun of him (Mark 15:30).

If others humiliate us, then, hurtful as it is, we have to realise that it is their problem. Jesus teaches us not to retaliate by treating them in the same way. On the contrary, he teaches us to forgive them and to have compassion on them, for 'they know not what they do'(Luke 23:34).

The prayer of today's Mass reminds us that 'the sufferings which Jesus endured restored hope to a fallen world'. This is because he showed that the cycle of violence and hurt does not have to go on. It can stop with us. We can resist hurting those who hurt us, or repressing the hurt only to lash out somewhere else. But we can learn this only by uniting our suffering to that of Jesus. The prayer of today's Mass goes on to pray: 'Make us one with you always'. Listen again to Jesus' words: 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely because of me'(Matthew 5:11). This is one of the hardest lessons to learn. Peter wrote in his first letter: 'If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you'(1Peter 4:14).

We don't look to be humiliated, and when it happens it is never pleasant. But by watching Jesus we learn that there really is a special grace in it. It teaches us to be humble, and we find ourselves crying out to God in our distress. God gives us the gift of his Spirit, who acts like a flame, using humiliations to burn away what is false in us, but only in order to release and help shine out what we really are - people created by love and for love, people in whom God, our Father, our Mother, delights.

Today's gospel teaches us two things. When we look at the people of Nazareth we see the folly of human pride, and the stupidity and blindness of looking down on ordinary people for their faults and weaknesses, and of showing off by criticising them and putting them down. When we

look at Jesus we learn how to respond when others humiliate us. We will be sad as he was, and we may even, like him, be amazed at their lack of faith, but we will not add to the hurt. May our words and actions continue, like his, to bring healing.