

Vocation Sunday

The mood of today's liturgy is one of joy. The Entrance Antiphon reminds us that the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord. The Responsorial Psalm calls on the whole world to cry out with joy to the Lord. We are not speaking of a feeling that can come and go, but a profound attitude of soul which is based on an appreciation of the truth that God is good, that nothing can change his merciful love, and that he, our Shepherd, has been faithful to those who have gone before us, he is faithful to us, and will continue to be faithful to our children and to all whom we love. There are ups and downs in everyone's life. The liturgy today invites us to experience the joy of Easter whether our circumstances at present are painful or delightful.

This faithful God calls everyone to belong to his Son whatever walk of life we have chosen or have found ourselves in. All of us are called to love and so to holiness. In the words of the Second Vatican Council:

"The Christian partakes in the paschal mystery, becomes like Christ in his death and will encounter the resurrection fortified with hope. Nor does this hold only for those who believe in Christ: it holds for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an invisible fashion. Christ died for everybody, everybody's ultimate vocation is the same, divine vocation; then we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers everybody the possibility of sharing in some way known to God in this paschal mystery"(Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*,n.22).

Under God's inspiration, and assured of God's forgiveness when we recognise where we have gone wrong and genuinely seek to change, each of us is called to charter our course through life. God has chosen to give us freedom and delights in the surprising choices which we make when these choices come from love and lead to love. In the words of the Vatican Council:

"The holiness of the Church ... is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love"(LG n.43).

The Church has set aside this Sunday as vocation Sunday, and invites us to pray for those who are being called by Jesus to follow him as priests or as members of a religious community of Brothers or Sisters. The recent canonisation of Mary MacKillop highlighted for all Australians what a wonderful contribution to our country was made by the thousands of women who joined with her in the Josephite Order. Meeting the wonderful women from the Star of the Sea Convent and the headmistress of our local school, as well as the De La Salle Brothers from Saint Michael's, we could say the same about these religious communities as well.

Joining a religious community is no automatic guarantee of enjoying a fulfilling life, any more than getting married. But we have all known wonderful Sisters and Brothers and Priests who have led happy and saintly lives and have given much love to those whom they served. When I was young many young Catholic men and women considered the possibility of committing their lives to Jesus and to the Church in this way. Today it is fashionable not to think in these terms. I think that the Church is the poorer for this, and I think many people are missing out on a life that could well bring them to a fuller flowering than the paths which everyone assumes are those that lead to happiness.

Every choice requires giving up other alternatives and a life that is happy grows out of many sacrifices. I can speak best of the life I know, and, in spite of the obvious sacrifices involved in being a priest, I cannot imagine a more privileged life. As my contribution to your reflections on Vocation Sunday, I would like to read a short fantasy written some years ago by a 20 year old Missionary of the Sacred Heart as he was approaching his final vows on the way towards becoming a priest. If you read between the lines it might give you a picture of how he felt, and might encourage some of you young men and women to dare a similar journey.

The mountain stream finds its winding way through the folds of grass and granite to pour its clear freshness into a valley, small and green. Clinging to the bank in the still and shallow waters grew a reed. This reed was not alone. It had enjoyed companionship ever since it first saw the light of day reflected through the water. Naturally enough it had grown to love the other reeds, and the life in the valley with its birds and flowers and children,

One day a mist crept up the valley and covered the reed with its blanket of cold. It felt strange and sad and alone. Then it heard, rising in the distance, the faintest strains of a flute. At least it sounded like a flute. The reed couldn't be sure. The music was coming down the hill, and as it drew nearer it sounded even more beautiful.

The mist was clearing at its approach and now the reed could make out, not far away and coming towards it, a man, a minstrel, and he was playing on something that looked like a reed. But, of course, it couldn't be a reed, for reeds cannot sound like that!

The lone wanderer came closer and knelt down, and, looking deep into the eyes of the reed, asked it would it come up the mountain with him. What me? But how can I? The valley was the only life it knew. How could it leave it? Where would this man take it? But there was something in the minstrel's eyes that told the reed that there was nothing to fear. So it said Yes, and the minstrel took it in his long and gentle fingers and drew it from the water. They started to climb together. His hands were warm.

They hadn't gone far when the reed looked back and in the clear sunlight saw the other reeds swaying to the breeze and sending each other messages over the rippling water. It felt very lonely. It could call all the reeds by name. It loved them, and they loved it. Why did this man take it away from them? Would it ever see them again? It was frightened, and, as they continued to climb, the air was colder and the wind whispered of other places, unknown. The reed looked into the eyes of the minstrel and hoped.

In the valley ... in the valley were the flowers and the birds and the laughter of the waters, and the leaves that floated by, bringing news of other parts. But they were climbing, above the roofs and the blue smoke that came curling upward. They climbed even into the clouds - the clouds that brought the drops of water it had played with since it could remember; the clouds that rainbowed down light and warmth.

The mountain continued to climb before them. Suddenly the reed found itself in darker cloud, heavy, black and threatening - the tall trees creaking and groaning, lashed by the wind, their gnarled trunks labouring with the chaotic clash of twisted branches. But something in the minstrel's eyes said not to be afraid and the small reed held fast to the hand that clasped it. They continued to climb.

The reed looked back now. It could no longer see the valley. It strained to see the valley, and its heart was torn. Around it was rock, bare, bleak rock; and above - the width of snow. Silence ... Stillness ... Immensity ... Not hills but the peaks of hills. No valley to be seen. Just the peaks of hills, silent and still.

Silent ... but now they had stopped, and a marvellous thing happened. For the silence of the endless snow was broken by the pure tones of what sounded like a flute. But no! The music came from a reed! from this reed! For as they had climbed, it had gradually left behind the marrow and substance of its own being, and now, unburdened, it was open to the life and breath of the minstrel. It had not dared hope. It had not dreamed. But the message of the minstrel echoed through the silent distances and down into the valley. For they were coming back, back to the other reeds. The mists thinned and vanished before them, and the minstrel bent down and drew other reeds to himself. It had been worth the climb!