

23rd Sunday of the Year, Year C

The Responsorial Psalm for today's Mass is a poetic reflection on the passing nature and brevity of human existence, and hence the importance of living wisely. Aware of the mistakes we have made and how we have wandered from God, we pray that God will relent and turn back to us, even though we know that it is we who have turned away from God, not God from us. The psalm concludes with a prayer for the joy that we experience when our hearts are at peace. With deep longing we ask God: 'in the morning fill us with your love'. We pray for this grace every morning of our lives, and finally that when our short life is ended we hope to awake to God's embracing love in the eternal morning of heaven.

In the First Reading the author reflects on how cluttered our lives can be. We get caught up in trivia; we spend our time trying to please people, trying to be acceptable. We hardly know what freedom is. We are like domesticated geese. We sense that we are born to fly but we know only the life of the cage and it looks really dangerous out there, so we cope as best we can in the cage, and life passes us by. We are not sure what to do. As the reading puts it: 'Our reasoning is unsure and our intentions unstable, for a perishable body presses down the soul and this tent of clay weighs down the teeming mind.'

How do we learn wisdom? How do we find freedom? Jesus gives us the key to the answer in the Gospel. He tells us that we have to give up our possessions. Let us look at what this might mean. It is not having that is the problem, it is possessing. God is constantly pouring his grace out upon us. He gives us life and he wants us to enjoy it. We possess when we tighten our grip on things and on people in an attempt to secure them for ourselves. That is what Jesus tells us not to do. Are there people whom we are possessing? Maybe people who have hurt us in the past and we won't let them go. We justify ourselves. We blame them for the way we are. Truly they may well have hurt us, but here we are and we are alive and God does renew his love every morning, but we are used to playing the victim, so we continue to let those who have hurt us in the past keep on controlling us. The cage door is open, but we choose to stay clinging to the roost when the sky is calling to us. It is time for the geese to leave and migrate to another land. It is time to be on the way, but we do not dare the journey and we like blaming others.

It is a good idea to live simply, but Jesus is saying a lot more than that. Let me read again his shocking words and then try to grasp his meaning. He says: 'If you come to me without hating your father, your mother, your wife or husband, your children, your family – in fact if you don't hate your own life as well – you cannot be my disciple – that is to say, you cannot learn to live like me.' Jesus is not using 'hate' in the way we normally use it. He is not saying that we should have negative feelings to the people he mentions. After all he didn't despise, reject or hate his own mother. It is a dramatic way in the idiom of his native language of saying that we have to get our priorities right. 'Love' means choose first. 'Hate' means don't choose first. What Jesus is saying is that no relationship however sacred should come between the deepest longing of our souls and the call of God. We must listen to the call of our soul and follow it. Love of anyone, including love of ourselves, is not true love if it locks us into a situation where we are denying our own soul and ignoring or resisting grace.

We all know how important family ties are and we have all experienced a lot of love in our families, even if the love was twisted because the people involved including ourselves were

broken and not coping. But family ties are not absolute and they can be crippling. If getting on with life means we have to break family ties, then Jesus is telling us to break them. We have to leave even the most comfortable cage if we are to learn to fly. We have to be ready to break even the most intimate ties if God calls us to live. Jesus is not talking about insensitivity. He is certainly not talking about doing our own thing no matter what hurt it may cause to those who love us. He is saying that when our soul, our deepest self, cries out for life, and God responds, calling us, like Peter, to step out of the boat and walk to him across the water, we must be ready to obey.

One thing must be clear. We are not the ones to make the decision as to what we should let go. When Peter sees Jesus he does not jump out of the boat. He says to Jesus: If you tell me I will come to you across the water. It is only when Jesus says 'Come' that Peter leaves the boat - not because there is anything wrong with the boat, but because he has to leave it to be with the one he loves, the one who is calling him.

The art of detachment is an art of love. It is about not holding things or people so tightly that when love and the fullness of life for which we are made calls us we are unable to let go and answer the call of life, the call of God. This morning's Gospel is not about us thinking what can we do without and then getting rid of it. It is about getting in touch with our deepest desires and then listening for the call of God. Of course it is important to live simply. If we are filled with the things of this world we may never have space to experience the hunger of our souls for God. But God is with us and probably most of the things and people in our life are sacraments of his love and he wants us to enjoy them to the full. However, if some things or one or other person is in fact stopping us from living in communion with God, then we are being told to follow our deepest longing, to respond to Jesus' call and to be willing to let go whatever is holding us bound.

So let us delight in everything that God gives us. Let us live in love with joy. Let us be deeply attached to the people in our lives and to the work we do. God wants us to grow closer to him precisely through our involvement in the real world of which we are part. It is through giving ourselves wholeheartedly to God's will that we become saints. As the Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, writes: 'Far too many Christians are insufficiently conscious of the divine responsibility of their lives. They live just like other people, giving only half of themselves, never experiencing the spur or the intoxication of advancing the kingdom of God in every domain of humankind. If you must blame us, then blame our weakness, not our faith. Our faith imposes upon us the right and the duty to throw ourselves into the things of the earth. For myself ... I want to dedicate myself body and soul to the sacred duty of research. We must test every barrier, try every path, plumb every abyss'(Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, page 69).

As followers of Jesus we are called to celebrate our existence and to live life to the full. Teilhard reminds us: 'Everything is needed, because the world will never be large enough to provide our taste for action with the means of grasping God, or our thirst for receiving with the possibility of being invaded by him'.

He goes on to pick up the message of today's readings. Let us live life to the full, but let us not hold life or people or things too tight. Let us enjoy, but not possess things. Teilhard has said that we need everything. He goes on to say: 'Yet, nothing is needed, for, as the only reality which can

satisfy us lies beyond the transparencies in which it is mirrored, everything that fades away and dies between us will serve only to give reality back to us with greater purity' (Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, page 122).

The day will come for all of us when we have to let everything go. Let us live now in such a way that all that matters is love. By learning to respond to his call now, we will be making the best possible contribution to the world and to those we love and we will be preparing ourselves for the final call when we will go with joy into the arms of our God.