

31st Sunday of the Year, Year C

Today's Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 145) is a hymn praising God, whose majesty, power, glory and providence is revealed in the order and beauty of creation. I am sure that we all have special memories of being deeply moved by the beauty of creation, especially when that beauty embraces us in the experience we know as love.

I remember as a child watching the sea creeping up the sand and then falling back as the tide changed. I asked why this was so and the answer fascinated me. My eyes were directed away from the sea and the land to the moon way up in the sky radiating its gentle light over both. The earth and the moon, I was told, experience an attraction to each other. The sea being 'lighter' than the land could give in to this attraction more readily. What I was watching was the sea constantly swelling up towards the moon, the tides following its movement. The physics was a bit beyond me but the idea struck home. I know that had I thought in terms of attraction, I would perhaps have thought in terms of an attraction of the sea for the land. It would never have occurred to me to look up. Yet the fact is that the attraction of the sea and the land for each other is but an expression of something deeper shared by both: an attraction to something quite other, something beyond the grasp of either.

This is for me an image for the whole of creation. Everywhere we look we see creatures attracted to each other. We experience ourselves needing to belong, to give and receive love. But all of this is an expression of a profound divine longing that links us all to the source of all being, to the one we call God. Saint Augustine, meditating on today's psalm, writes: 'Look at the whole fabric of creation, all its intricate and ordered beauty, its harmony swelling to a crescendo from the simplest to the most intricate forms of life ... All of creation praises the glory of God'. 'In what sense', he asks, 'can we say God is praised? God is praised when we, contemplating creation and finding it beautiful, praise God. The perfection of the earth is like a voice that is mute. Let us fix our gaze upon it and see its beauty. Let us look at the life constantly bursting forth, the energy, the wonder of the seed that gives birth to something so much grander than itself. Let us see it, and in our contemplation seek answers to our questions ... Let us discover the immense power of it all, its beauty and energy. We will come to realise that creation does not exist of itself. It points to its Creator. What we have discovered in it witnesses to the one who gives it all it is, and we are moved to praise the Creator. And so, as we contemplate the perfection of this world, its very beauty responds: 'I do not make myself. It is God!' All the beauty of the world surrounds us, and we are part of this creation! And what of the beauty of the angelic world which also envelops us? And what of the reign of God's love? This we do not yet see in all its splendour, but we know to believe in it even though we see it so imperfectly. Believing in it, we long for it, and this longing enables us to bear all things. It is the grandeur of a perfection which certainly be revealed. Not yet seeing God, we are in love with him, that we may possess him when we see his beauty.'

In the same vein, Augustine writes in his autobiography: 'I asked the earth ... I asked the sea ... and they replied: 'We are not your God. Look beyond us!' I asked the sun, the moon, the stars, and they said: 'Neither are we the God whom you seek!' I said to all these things: 'You have told me that you are not my God. Tell me about him'. With a loud voice they cried out: 'He made us!' My questioning was my looking upon them. Their reply was their beauty'(Confessions, 10.6.9.).

Our weak human minds cannot understand God, and we can be so distracted as to ignore or even deny God's existence. But the honest, inquiring mind has always been impressed by an obvious fact: While we and everything around us actually exist, we have to look beyond ourselves to find a satisfactory reason for this fact. It is not enough to say that we are brought into existence by our parents and that once we exist we don't have to look further to explain our existence. The question is not just how did you or I come into existence, but rather, why do we exist now at all. Since we cannot explain our own present existence, there must exist in reality a being that is not dependent, that has in itself the explanation for its own existence and that is the ultimate cause holding in existence everything that is. We call this being God.

Today's First Reading (Wisdom 11:22 - 12:2) reflects on these same truths. The author is very conscious of how fragile we all are: 'In your sight, Lord, the whole world is like a grain of dust on the scales, like a drop of dew falling on the ground'. In many ways we find attractive what is fragile. We think of the finest porcelain, or the rarest flower. We think of the delicate filigree of a butterfly's wing, or the wonder of a child being formed in a mother's womb. We think of two people finding comfort in their weakness through a shared embrace. Each person has his or her special beauty, and invariably our beauty is discovered in the delicate, fragile ways in which we differ.

Our fragility is experienced also in the moral area. We find it so easy to sin. We are cold and like a moth we rush towards the fire only to be burned. We are hurt and we struggle to free ourselves, only to find that we hurt others in the process. We are lost and so easily we follow any lead that promises to set us on the path to life. We have in us God's own breath of life, a longing that wells up from the mysterious depths of our being and reaches out to give and receive love. But, as the author of Genesis states so dramatically, this life-spirit is experienced by us who are little more than dust, blown hither and thither by the merest breath, till finally, like autumn leaves we drop from the tree of life and die.

And so the author of the Book of Wisdom, having spoken of our fragility, goes on to reflect on the wondrous mercy of God: 'You are merciful to all ... you overlook our sins so that we can repent. Yes, you love all that exists, you delight in everything that you have made ... Lord, you are a Lover of life, you whose imperishable spirit is in everything.' We hear the same confident message in the Psalm: 'How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures ... The Lord supports all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down'.

God knows our weakness. He does not want us to stay lost or to keep hurting ourselves and others by our habitual fears and failings, and so, as the First Reading reminds us: 'Little by little, you correct those who offend, you admonish and remind them of how they have sinned, so that they may abstain from evil and trust in you, O Lord'.

God's gentle and pardoning love is revealed in Jesus, and perhaps nowhere more convincingly than in the scene portrayed in today's Gospel (Luke 19:1-10). Jesus is constantly lamenting the problems that material wealth brings to those whose hearts are distracted by it (see Luke 6:24; 18:24-25). Yet, here we see Zacchaeus who must have been one of the most hated men in Jericho. Not only had he acquired wealth from his fellow countrymen by extortion, he had done it in the name of the hated foreign overlords, the Romans. This man is truly 'lost'.

However, he is keen to see Jesus and is willing to go to any lengths to do so. Jesus responds to his wishes and sees in this distracted man's heart a generosity hidden from the man himself and from all who knew him. Jesus invites himself to enjoy Zacchaeus's hospitality and the childlike delight with which the tax collector responds is proof of an innocence that underlay his foolish preoccupation with wealth. He receives Jesus with joy. He now has something to live for and so finds the energy and determination to bring about changes to his way of life.

Notice Jesus' words: 'Today, salvation has come to this house!' The Church wants each of us to hear these same words. There is a grace here in today's liturgy for each and all of us. We are fragile; we make mistakes; we are more frightened than we dare admit; we are often lost and bewildered. Today, this same Jesus is inviting us to look into our hearts and discover there our longing for love. He is inviting us to look out at creation and ponder the beauty that we see there: fragile creatures held in a wonderful harmony, which transcends even the destructive forces of human folly.

Zacchaeus, we are told, 'was trying to see Jesus'. As the scene draws to a close it becomes clear that the longing in the heart of Zacchaeus was in response to an even deeper longing in the heart of Jesus who 'came to seek out and to save the lost'. Today he wants to touch that part of each of us that is lost. He wants to share this meal with us and lift our hearts to trust in the Father who is drawing us to himself. Believe in the delight God has in looking at each one of us. He sees our frailty, but he also sees our longing and the beauty of our soul made for communion with God.