

## Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

The man in today's gospel comes up to Jesus full of a beautiful desire. He wants what Mark calls 'eternal life' - that is a life that knows no bounds, a life that is not limited by space and time and circumstance, but that keeps on filling his heart from the fount of all life who is God. This same desire is expressed frequently in the psalms: 'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?' (Psalm 42:1-2). 'O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, like a dry and weary land without water' (Psalm 63:1).

Commenting on the psalm which says: 'Seek his face always' [Psalm 105:4], Saint Bernard reminds us that we will never cease seeking God even when we find him. 'When the soul happily finds God its desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? On the contrary, it acts like oil poured upon the flames. Joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Do not think of your eagerness to see God as caused by his absence, for God is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present' (Sermon 84:2).

We all know this desire. And it is no surprise when this young man experiences it that he is attracted to Jesus. And we are told that Jesus gazed upon him and loved him. So why did he go away grieving? What was his problem?

In the scene just before this one, people are bringing little children to Jesus. When the disciples object Jesus says: 'If you do not receive the kingdom of God as a little child you will never enter it'. The rich young man is very earnest, and has been exemplary in obeying God's commandments, but he cannot change and become like a child.

Life is a gift. How can we accept a gift if our hands are full and we don't want to let anything go. For the young man in today's gospel the problem was not wealth. Rather it was the fact that he possessed his riches. He controlled his life and he thought he could stay in control and possess eternal life as well. But we can't. As Jesus says, salvation - finding the life we seek and need - is impossible for us; we can't get it on our own. It comes from God.

In a book called 'The hermitage within', a Cistercian monk writes of the kind of longing of which we have been speaking. He tells us that to have our longings met, we must be open to the direction in which the Spirit of God is drawing us. Speaking of the moment of the Incarnation, he reminds us that both Mary and Jesus had the same attitude. According to Luke's gospel, Mary simply opened herself to God's Spirit and said: 'Let it be done unto me according to your will' (Luke 1:38). And according to the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus said: 'I am coming to do your will, O God' (Hebrews 10:9). The Cistercian monk concludes with a warning: 'It will not be long before you discover how bitter it is to renounce your own will' (page 66).

This was the young man's problem. This is why he went away grieving. Being rich he was used to control. He thought he could save himself if only he knew what more he could do. In the ensuing dialogue Jesus makes it quite clear that if we truly want to live to the full we have to learn to have empty hands. If there is anything to which we are clinging we have to let it go in order to free our hands to be open to receive life from God who is love.

The man in the gospel has a problem with material possessions. The problem for the scribes and Pharisees was knowledge and power. We are being invited to ask ourselves what is it that is stopping me from receiving what my heart most longs for. Is there something that is cluttering up my life? Am I, like the young man, too proud to go to God with empty hands and receive love like a little child, knowing that it is a gift of love over which I cannot claim control?

We all share the same desire, and we are all being drawn to the one source of all love. But we all start in different places and so while we are all heading in the direction of Jesus we are walking different paths. What is an obstacle for one person may not be so for another. But wherever we are, the risen Christ is calling each of us to him and offering us that for which we most long. To receive it, however, we will have to let something go. Whatever it is that is blocking our journey, that is the possession which we must give up.

As a way of reflecting on this, could I suggest that we each take time today to pray quietly the psalm chosen as today's response (Psalm 90). The psalmist reflects on how quickly the years pass and on the tenuous hold we have on life. He then goes on to reflect on the pain we experience because of our and other people's sin. The verses chosen for today's Mass come from the conclusion.

He prays firstly for 'wisdom of heart'. We have made mistakes – pray that we may learn from them. Only harm can come from wallowing in our mistakes or in the mistakes which others have made in our regard. We have to acknowledge the fact, accept appropriate responsibility, and learn to forgive others and to forgive ourselves. The humility we learn will, please God, teach us wisdom of heart.

Then the psalmist prays 'In the morning fill us with your love'. We pray that God's glory will shine on us and on our children, and we pray that God will bring it about that our lives, though fleeting and full of mistakes, will still be worthwhile. The psalmist is looking forward to a new start, to the dawn of a new day full of hope. As Christians we see this new day as the morning of Christ's Resurrection, and that is precisely why we are gathered here at Mass.

This is the Lord's Day, the first day of a new week. Like the rich young man we are longing for life. Let us learn from his mistake. We do not need to go away from here grieving. We are invited to come, with empty hands, and receive Jesus himself to be food for our journey. We speak of the obligation we have to celebrate Mass each Sunday. 'Obligation' is a good word. It comes from two Latin roots. The verb 'ligo' means 'to bind', and the prefix 'ob' means 'right up against'(as in 'objection', 'obstruction'). We need each other and as followers of Jesus and members of his Body, the Church, we are bound to each other and to Christ. So we are gathered here together on the Day of the Lord, the Day of the Resurrection, to share our journey, but especially to listen to God's Word and to open our hearts and minds and bodies to receive him who alone can satisfy our longing for 'eternal life'.

The Mass is also called the 'Eucharist' meaning 'Thanksgiving Prayer'. We thank God for Jesus, we thank God for the gift of faith, and we thank each other for sharing our silence, our singing, our hunger and thirst, and the gift of our companionship on the journey. Jesus looks steadily at each of us this morning and loves us. His heart is grieving for the many who are not here. Some,

like the rich young man, think that they can find their own way; others have become distracted. Perhaps our greatest gift to the world is to build a community of faith through which Jesus can continue to issue both the welcome and the challenge that we need if we are to fulfil the deep longings for life that are in our hearts.

Gathered as we are at this Eucharist may we share the desire that burned in the heart of one of the Church's early martyrs, Saint Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. He was being taken to Rome to be thrown to the lions in the recently constructed Colosseum. On his way he wrote ahead to the Christian community in Rome: 'Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father'. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love'.

It is to satisfy this same desire and for no other reason that we come here each Sunday. Let us remember the advice of Saint John of the Cross: 'God does not give grace and love except according to the soul's desire and love. The more the soul desires and loves, the more God gives'(Spiritual Canticle 13,12).

There is no need for us to go away grieving, for he loves us and longs to give himself to us. Can we free ourselves to receive him?