

Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

The mood of today's readings is summed up well in the Responsorial Psalm. The people have seen their country ravaged by war, their city Jerusalem (called Zion in this psalm) has been destroyed along with its temple, and they have been living as exiles in Babylon. Then, to their utter amazement, they have been given permission by king Cyrus, the Persian conqueror of Babylon, to return home, to rebuild their country and their lives. It was all too good to be true. In the words of the psalm 'When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, it seemed like a dream'(Psalm 126:1). They had left Jerusalem in tears, now they are returning 'full of song'. Their exile is over, there is still much that needs healing and so, in the midst of their overwhelming joy, they continue to pray: 'Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage, as streams in dry land'(Psalm 126:4).

This experience of being an exile is part of everybody's life. We all have dreams that are unfulfilled. We all sense a mystery that is being enacted in our lives that we cannot understand and that no one else seems to recognise. In an ultimate sense we experience it as a longing for our real home, which is with God and which we call heaven. Paul says what we all know – that we do not have here an abiding home. Sometimes we are loved very beautifully and we seem to escape from this sense of longing. Sometimes we manage to fill our lives up in such a way that we put our loneliness out of sight for a while. But inevitably – and let us add 'thank God' – we have to experience and face our feeling of being exiles, for that is the fact of the matter, however much we enjoy being part of this wonderful world.

The feeling is not meant to paralyse us. This is where we are, so let's get on with living as lovingly and creatively as we can. But if we never feel the pull of home, if we fail to realise, with Saint Augustine, that the reason why our hearts are so restless is that we have eternal longings and we can only finally find rest in God, then we are in grave danger of cluttering up our hearts and wasting our lives. The Japanese express the concept of being 'too busy' with two characters: one is heart and the other is destruction. If we so busy ourselves that we repress the feeling of being in exile, we are in danger of destroying our hearts. We are here to laugh all our laughter and to cry all our tears, not to blot out reality in a life of distraction.

Look at the man in the Gospel. He used to see once, but now he knows he is blind. He has lost it. He is going nowhere, stuck on the side of the road. Isn't it good that he knows this, for when he hears that Jesus is passing by he resists the pressure of the crowd and cries out in his distress to the only one who can help him see again.

Will Jesus understand his cry? The author of the Second Reading is convinced that he will. 'He can sympathise with those who do not know or are uncertain because he too lives in the limitations of weakness'. A few verses earlier he has reminded us that Jesus was tested in every way that we are. However, unlike us, he did not sin. Jesus knew the blind man's longing. Jesus knows what it is like to be an exile, even to feeling abandoned by God. But he kept crying out. He kept loving. He kept walking on the way - the way to the crucifixion but also the way to the resurrection. We all have our crosses. They are there whether we cry out or not. We can't always run away from them. Jesus teaches us to face them in faith. The resurrection was God's response to Jesus' cry, and God will love us all through our pain and finally into his eternal embrace.

The blind man somehow sensed all this and so he cries out to Jesus. Mark wants us to see him as a symbol for us all. A fortnight ago it was a rich man who felt the call but couldn't let go his possessions to follow his dream. He went away from Jesus sad. Last week it was people who were jealous of their position and power. Jesus tells them to get in touch with the little child in them – the little child who is crying out for life. Today we see a man with nearly nothing. All he has is an old cloak. He slept in it and during the day he placed it in front of him hoping for a few coins from a compassionate passer-by.

He knows what he wants - they all do. They sense something in Jesus that is beautiful and free. He calls out and he won't let anyone talk him out of it. Jesus stops. Of course he stops. This is God who hears the cry of the poor. He wants to respond to the blind man's call. But notice that Jesus does not call the man himself. He does it through others. That is the way it happens. Jesus hears our call and he answers it through those who listen to him and learn to love as he loves. He needs us to love for him.

Now comes the important part. The man throws off his cloak. It is all he has but it is enough to hold him back. In fact one gets the impression that it is the cloak that is making him unable to see. A bird cannot fly if you tie its leg with a piece of string. But even if you tie it with the thinnest gossamer thread, it cannot fly unless it can break the thread. There is nothing much holding this man back, but he has to throw it off or he will never be able to run to Jesus. He has to cast off the cloak or he will never be free to see. What am I hiding behind? What am I holding on to, however insignificant, that is keeping my hands clasped and so unable to receive God's gift. What is stopping me go to Jesus with open hands?

Jesus, with typical respect, does not presume to know what the man wants, but asks him: 'What do you want me to do for you?' Let that be Jesus' question to each of us today. Jesus loves us. He doesn't make decisions for us. He doesn't control us or lock us into a cage, however safe it might appear. He doesn't constrain us. He wants us to be free, really free. So he asks us to ask ourselves what it is that we really want. Why are we unsatisfied, off the road and blind? What do I want Jesus to do for me?

The blind beggar asks to see again. And it is his 'faith' that makes it possible for him to be healed and so to see. The sight we are talking of here is not the sight of the eye, or even the sight of the mind. It is the seeing of the heart that knows it is made for love and that recognises in Jesus the God who is the answer to its longing. It is the sight of one who knows its own powerlessness, and who cries out for grace, trusting in the mercy of God revealed in Jesus. It is this faith, and nothing else, that makes it possible for the disciple to 'follow Jesus on the way' — the way to Jerusalem, and so to death: the way through death to the resurrection and fullness of life as God's beloved.

In the silence of prayer, let us contemplate this scene, and be the blind beggar. Let us taste our experience of being blind, of being alone, by the side of the road, missing out on life. Let us cry out for help. Let us anticipate a response, and listen for it. Let us be willing to cast off whatever it is that gives us our security, little though it may be, and let us run to him.