

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 14 Year B 2018

When the towering spiritual figure of 6th century, Saint Benedict, came to gather and organise a community of monks around him, he established a 'rule', a guide by which they would live together. His Rule is still observed by thousands of men and women in religious communities around the world. And in his rule, in two important portions, Benedict reminds his community that God can be encountered in surprising and perhaps unexpected ways. Benedict tells his communities that guests are to be welcomed 'as Christ', and that the objects and the belongings of the monastery are to be respected and regarded as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar. The idea being that God can be encountered and experienced in the ordinary, the everyday, and even in ordinary, everyday people. An authentic, sustaining, faith is one anchored in the stuff and the people around us.

The person knocking at the monastery door seeking food and lodging welcomed without question, expectation or demand as if they were Christ was, and *is*, a radical form of hospitality. Imagine how radical our hospitality would be if we welcomed the stranger (and the strange!) as if they were Christ! The ordinary person received as a divine guest... And in exhorting his communities to handle the goods and property of the monastery as if they were the sacred objects of the altar Benedict prefigures the environmental age by centuries! He is saying *look after what you've got!* Because, with the collapse of the Roman Empire and Europe moving into the Dark Ages, he is reminding, *it's all we got!* But in valuing what we have, treasuring what we have, respecting what we have, we will indeed discover - in the ordinary things around us - a place of divine encounter. For we will see how dependent we are on God's good grace. We gain a deeper sense of our place, and so open us to the great mystery of where we truly stand before God our maker.

The saints never cease being filled with wonder at the mysterious presence of God they constantly sense *all around* them. The saints perceive God reliably and sustainably present in the *ordinary and everyday*. God is to be found not just in the Temple of Jerusalem, in ritual and sacrifice and observance of Law, but even in a surprising place like Nazareth.

How important it is that we take notice of the Nazareth in *our* lives! The issue at the heart of the gospel we encounter today can be our issue as well: *a failure to recognise God in our midst*; a failure to see that God might be present and active and at work even in the ordinariness of our lives, even in the ordinariness of our surroundings, even in the ordinary people around us.

In the life of faith, one of the issues we might encounter is that we imagine that our faith, our spirituality, our life with God will always be better somewhere else, that *later on* we will have it worked out, that in *other people's lives* God speaks and acts. In other words, God is always active and present 'over there' somewhere else but never here. So, we see people hopping from church to church, from spiritual guide to spiritual guide, from one religious fad to another, because '*this one just isn't working for me.*' This phenomenon, of course, just reflects the consumerist culture we live in: religious 'products' can be chosen at will and discarded when they have served their supposed purpose, or updated when something better comes along. But God calls us to faithfulness, not novelty. We cannot lay deep roots and *draw deeply from the wells of salvation* if we are always looking beyond and over there. We must learn the hard lesson that if we cannot find God 'here' - wherever our 'here' is - then we are unlikely to find God anywhere.

So, in the life of faith we have to guard against imagining that something better, truer, more life-giving can only be found somewhere 'over there.'" But we also have to guard against imagining that the life of faith (or a faith that really counts) will only be seen and experienced in the large, the dramatic and the imposing. We imagine God's work will only be forceful and impressive. And so, in our spiritual life we are left despondent, frustrated and looking elsewhere when our prayer doesn't seem to make us 'feel anything', when there are no dramatic healings, when no clear voice is heard. We imagine God can only be at work (or *more* at work) in a large congregation with lots happening. And so, we give up on God or praying or our church because they do not conform how we think God or our experience of God *should be* experienced. We can so limit our idea of how God should be encountered and known, we risk end up missing him altogether.

We see the dynamic of these two directions at work in the Gospel today. For that gathered assembly in the synagogue in Nazareth the messiah will be revealed somewhere else, somewhere later: somewhere but not here. He couldn't possibly come from here, couldn't possibly come from Nazareth, and most certainly couldn't come from the household of Mary and Joseph. There might be an element of familiarity breeds contempt at work here. They know (or at least, they think they know) Jesus. He has grown up there, played with their kids, built their houses, fixed their chicken coops, or whatever. They know his family. They know Mary and James and Joset and Jude, and his sisters. All that is to be known and understood from that household they think they know! It's all sewn up. It's all understood...

Even if those congregants at the synagogue at Nazareth marvel at Jesus' sayings - as they do - and even if they wonder how these miracles are worked through him - as they do - the blockage, the insurmountable barrier to them recognising their hoped for and long promised Messiah, is his ordinariness. *'This is the carpenter, surely'*. The tone of snobbish elitism is unmistakable here: A carpenter, of all things, having these pretensions! They have their own fixed ideas as to when and where and how the Messiah should come to Israel. And the one they knew as the carpenter - Mary's son - simply didn't fit the bill.

Family of little Liam, the greatest gift you can bestow on this beautiful boy is allowing him to come to know Jesus through the life of the church; that it is not restricted to special and rare occasions; that the life of faith becomes part of the fabric of his ordinary life, that it becomes friendly and familiar to him.

My brothers and sisters, progress in the spiritual life almost always shows itself in the ability to recognize God more and more in the ordinary, the everyday. And this just reflects one of the great mysteries of our faith - that the eternal Son of God become a human being, and that he took that human form in a town as ordinary and as insignificant as Nazareth. And if there, then anywhere, *even here*. Rather than just looking for God somewhere else; rather than looking for God in the mighty and dramatic, we are invited to celebrate our Nazareth, to find God where we are - even in our ordinariness. Amen.