

## Sermon Ordinary Sunday 15 Year C 2022

If we were to consider the four gospels as four treasure chests, we would find an inexhaustible wealth for the rest of our days. Indeed, the gospels *are* a wealth of rich and precious stories, insights, and truths. But if we were to take just a handful of treasure from each Gospel, what would we settle on? This year we journey closely with the Gospel of Luke. If we were to take just three jewels from the treasure chest of Luke's gospel what might we take? I think we would certainly want to take with us the infancy narratives of chapters 1 and 2. I think I would then insist on the parable of the Prodigal Son, such a critical offering in this gospel for understanding the love and mercy of God, the hope of the gospel, and how even the worst of human depravity can be redeemed. And then I think I would settle on the parable of the Good Samaritan. Again, unique to Luke's gospel, and giving us such insight into the life of mercy and compassion.

Now all this is quite hypothetical and quite unnecessary, of course. The treasures of all the gospels are available for us for all time, to delight in, to wonder over, to nurture us, comfort us, and challenge us. But I think it does help to highlight how the gospels aren't all saying the same thing, or even all the same thing in slightly different ways. They each have their own voice, their own unique contributions, and their own particular way of addressing the question, *who is Jesus and why is he important?*

The story of the good Samaritan is of course well-loved and familiar to us. As we look at it again it is helpful to keep the context in mind. The story is told in response to a question posed by a lawyer (of course!) who wishes to 'test' Jesus (or in some translations 'disconcert' Jesus). *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* In best pedagogical practice, Jesus asks a question in return. *What is written in the law?* To which the reply comes, *you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.* In other words, complete and total love of God will lead to eternal life. God as the priority of our lives will help us understand ourselves and so help us love our neighbor.

Because, love of God must have practical, concrete expression. This is not a new idea. The faithful Jew at the time of Jesus would have been well aware that love of God was something that needed to be practically reflected in their lives. It was to be seen in the laws of purity and cleanliness. The laws on sacrifice and circumcision. Observance of feasts and festivals. Fidelity to the ten commandments, and all the rest. These outward markers indicating that one was seeking to fulfill what God had ordained.

This total commitment - really covering really the *whole* of life - was a mark of love. And coming from a sense that the Creator God who had established a sacred bond – covenant – with his people was simply deserving of faithful (and loving) obedience. The difficulty arises, however, when the outward expressions become *a substitute* for love. Something becomes misaligned when the outward expressions of belief replace inner conviction; when the motivation of love is replaced with a motivation of duty. The outward expressions become, then, not a response of love, but a burden. And so, it is something of this tension between the externals and the internals of religion that is on display in the gospel parable today.

The lawyer to whom Jesus tells this story has placed his trust in faithfully observing the externals of his faith. And the priest and Levite in the parable, also Jews who are supposed to faithfully observe the externals of their faith, are seen to walk past the man who has been beaten and left for dead. To be sure *they are* doing the right thing. *They are* observing the letter of the law. To touch a bloodied body and perhaps a corpse, would be to make them unclean, and would prevent them from exercising their religious duties. They do not wish to be contaminated. Now, we might suppose that when Jesus introduces the Samaritan to the story the first hearers would have supposed that he too will walk on by. But no! While the beaten and dying man is ignored and rejected by his own people, by those who might be thought to be his neighbour, it is the despised foreigner, who proves to be the true neighbour.

The priest and Levite faithfully observe the externals of their religion. But they *are not* condemned in the story because they are a priest and Levite. Something is missing. Something is out of place. And that is, of course, what Our Lord is our drawing our attention to. Now, it is no bad thing to draw our attention to this in a church such as ours where the externals are important. We value ritual, and the external, physical aspects of our incarnational faith. The catholic faith is a disciplined faith, but disciplines which seeks to align the internal and externals dimensions of our faith.

The externals – whether that be our formalised worship, our personal prayer, devotions and practices, our charity, sacrificial giving, our acts of mercy - are important, but they cannot substitute the content of faith. The content of faith essentially is encounter with, and obedience to, the Lord Christ. A faith that says, *Jesus is Lord*. The externals support and direct us to this. They are not ends in themselves. Their end is to draw us into deeper love and service of the Lord Christ.

That is what all *this* is for. Why we are here. Why we adhere to traditional forms. Why we insist on beauty and reverence. Because they direct us to Christ. Yes, there is an element of duty in this. But that is because left to our own devices, none of us would bother with any of it. But in the end, faith cannot be sustained merely by the externals.

For those who have ears to hear would have heard a fair bit of commentary of late on the results of the last census. Fr James reflected on some of that last week. But we would make a mis-step if we were to see the census results merely in terms of doom and gloom for the church. We are now moving into a phase in the church's life in the west in which we are finally getting some honesty about the figures. Honesty about those who actually do believe and are committed to the church. The diminishing status of the church in our culture should not unnerve or unsettle us. Our Lord says: *not everyone who says to me lord, lord will enter the kingdom. And, Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.* We should learn to own our minority status.

One commentator a week or so ago helpfully noted that what we are seeing now is the end of 'tribal Christianity'. In a migrant country such as ours, it doesn't really mean very much for emerging generations to speak of Italian Catholics or Orthodox Greeks, or German Lutherans and even English Anglicans. And that is no bad thing. Because mostly this led to a situation where it was really only the externals that mattered! That is, Christianity was simply a tribal marker, among other tribal markers such as the language your grandparents spoke or what you eat for Christmas lunch. In other words, faith which is more or less completely dependent on the externals of believing, doesn't last. Identifying with a religious group - Christianity included - disappears once the props of the dominant culture collapse.

For those for whom faith was as tenuous as that, well, to them we might say farewell and all the best. But the church really does not need more freeloaders! The church does not need more people coasting on the wings of residual belief in the mainstream culture. What we want - and need - is people willing to sign up to the faith of the martyrs! Faith where our love of God is with our whole hearts, soul, strength and mind. When God is properly the focus of our lives then we can reach out and engage with the world about us. That is the faith of the future. A faith for us. A faith where the inner and outer dimensions align. A faith which is costly to self but gives life to others. Amen.