

Sunday Homily

17 OCTOBER 2021

YEAR B

29th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Illustration

An old folk tale, found in many languages, tells the story of a poor woodman who was poised to chop down a tree when he heard the voice of a woodland spirit calling to him. "Please do not destroy this tree, for it is my home," said the spirit. "If you spare the tree, I will grant you three wishes." The woodman lowered his axe and the tree was saved.

That night, back in their humble cottage, the woodman told his wife what had happened. The wife was excited to hear of the three wishes. "So what will you wish for?" she asked. The woodman was hungry. "I wish that there was a sausage on my plate," he declared. And in a flash there appeared on his empty plate a delicious-looking sausage.

His wife, however, was furious. "You fool!" she said. "You could have used your precious wish to ask for riches or treasure, instead of this stupid sausage. I wish the sausage was on your nose!" Immediately there was a flash of light, and the sausage was no longer on the plate but stuck fast to the woodman's nose. And of course they had to use their third and final wish to have the sausage removed.

This of course is just a story, but the point is a good one. We should be careful what we wish for. Sometimes in getting what we want we can hurt others, disappoint ourselves and realise that we wanted something else all along.

Gospel Teaching

In today's Gospel, James and John are unwise in what they wish for. Jesus gives them every chance to get themselves out of trouble and tells them directly, "You do not know what you are asking." James and John imagine a kingdom of earthly power where they will be rulers. Even when Jesus asks them if they can drink his cup and share his baptism they rashly claim that they can. We might be reminded of St Peter declaring absolutely that he will never desert Jesus, not long before he denies him three times.

Here James and John reveal their ambition. But it seems they want "the bonus without the onus", as the saying goes. Jesus grants them their wish, but not in the way they expect. They will share the cup, the cup of his sufferings. They will share in his baptism, the baptism of his death, and no earthly reward will be theirs.

True discipleship, then, will involve suffering and even dying for Christ, and only then will there be a share in glory. Not the glory of this world, but that of eternal life with God. Jesus also teaches that as well as suffering, service is the hallmark of discipleship. Unlike the “so-called” rulers of the pagans, the apostles will live lives of service: service of God and service of neighbour. It is Christ himself who gives us this pattern, as, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, he gives his life as a ransom for humanity, in loving obedience to the will of the Father.

Application

Our journey of faith is leading us to eternal life with God. On the way we are given the opportunity to build up God’s kingdom and serve our neighbours. So first of all we are called to get our desires sorted out. If we go after the wrong things, or think that something or someone in this world will make us totally happy, we are sadly deceived.

Through the incarnation, God has shown us the way to eternal life. Christ our high priest has opened that way for us. He also knows the ways in which we are tempted, and how we can choose lesser goods over what is really true and good. Yet Christ still loves us, and continues to give himself to us in the sacraments. By living a sacramental life in the Church, we become conformed to Christ, and grow in his love. Through the gift of the Spirit, and the sacrament of confirmation, we are given the gifts of wisdom, understanding and knowledge. These can help lead us in the right direction on our journey of faith.

Like James and John, we sometimes fail to want the right thing, and, like them, the Lord teaches us and makes us his disciples, even despite ourselves. Through the sacraments we are renewed in heart and mind; and, in the words of one of the prayers in the Missal, are helped to love the things of heaven, and judge wisely the things of earth.