

Reflections on Gospel Readings for Sundays and Feast Days

September Archive

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C – Luke 14.1 & 7-14

Today's Gospel reading is about pride and humility – in other words our attitude toward ourselves. "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

At dinner in the house of a leading Pharisee, Jesus counsels the host and his guests about humility and generosity. Jesus is speaking about two attitudes in this passage. The first is fairly obvious – attitude to self. The second might not be so obvious – attitude to others. Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus being interested in attitude; Jesus is an attitude person. For Jesus it is attitude that shapes action. If we are to be men and women of God who really make a difference, then our world view has to reflect this. This is, perhaps, why the Gospel is so difficult to preach today. Most people believe that they are basically good eggs and if everyone else were like them the world would be a better place! But we can do nothing of our own to merit the saving grace of God. Pride has no place in the life of a Christian.

That having been said, let's look at the second attitude to which Jesus alluded – attitude to others. Attitude to self determines attitude to others. At the meal Jesus observed guests pushing and shoving their way to the more important places at the table. By doing this they showed what they thought of others present. As they jostled their way to the top of the table they were indirectly saying, "you are not important enough for the seat that I am going to take." Jesus said that if we do this we will fall; we will be put in our place.

Having recently celebrated the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption (her heavenly birthday) and, as this month we will celebrate her Nativity (her earthly birthday), puts me in mind of her Magnificat. This attitude is also reflected earlier in Luke's Gospel by Mary herself, "He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek." God's ways are completely opposite to those of the world; it is the humble that are successful; it is by acknowledging our lowliness that we receive the grace of God and are, in fact, exalted. However, let us not be humble in order to be exalted, but because we have a genuine regard and concern for the dignity and wellbeing of our sisters and brothers.

Fr. Julian Kent CFMD

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C – Luke 14, 25-33

I heard quite a few sermons on today's Gospel but many of them were trying to soften Jesus's words. Words that are neither easy nor make us in any way comfortable. Words that break the picture of sweet little Jesus being a trademark of those who these days change His message into an easy-to-swallow pill, so it does not require much effort from them. Difficult words.

It is not that difficult to explain what that hate towards mother and father and brothers mean, especially if we look at Matthew 10, 37. But even then, the expectation to love Jesus more than anyone else, seems to be a little bit too much, right?

So what do you want from me, Jesus? You want me to love you more than my family? Then, why do I hear, on and on, that the family should be the most important value for society, for me? You want me to love you more than my partner? Even if we are married? Jesus, do you know what you are saying?

He knows what He is saying and whether we like it or not, we cannot be His disciples or followers or even Christian if you like, should He not be our number one... should we not take our cross and follow Him. Yes, our own cross. No skiving off your life, your sickness, your failures and your future. And we know, or so I hope, what His way towards resurrection was. And so will be ours.

There will be triumphant moments but there will be loneliness and misunderstanding and pain too. But it is worth it! It will be full of people whom we need to love as he did. We will need to become 'all for all' just like he did. But it is worth it! Why? Because we know where we are going.

Do you want to carry on, then? If your answer is yes, you know what is Jesus's expectation. And we, Brothers of the Merciful Love of God together with all bishops, priests, deacons and nuns within our jurisdiction, are ready to keep you company. After all, we knew there is no other way for us and how much it takes. And we are still on it. Right, my brothers?

God bless you on this beautiful Sunday, wherever you are and whatever the weather is. It is always a beautiful Sunday when He invites us to share with Him at His table and empowers us to carry our cross till the end.

Fr. Chris CFMD

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross , Year C – John 3, 13-17

Our first reading (Numbers 21:4-9) we hear of the Israelites complaining as they journeyed through the wilderness regretting that they had ever left Egypt. God punished them by sending a plague of deadly fiery serpents. The people repented and God made an image of a serpent and when looked upon they would be healed. The Israelites journey lasted 40 years and was necessary for purification after being exposed to the customs and rituals of the Egyptians for many years. It was not the first nor the last time the Israelites would be grumbling on their journey.

In John's gospel (John 3:13-17), we are listening to a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. John takes this story and used it as a parable of Jesus, 'the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him'. Lifted up has two meanings here, being lifted up on the Cross and then being lifted up in glory at his Ascension. These two things are linked and one could not happen without the other. The cross was the way to glory. Jesus had a choice and if evaded there would have been no glory for him. This may be the same for us, we choose the easy way or the way of the cross as we are called to bear. Choosing the easy way means no glory for us.

This gospel speaks of the unconditional love of God. This may have been confusing for Jews at that time, God imposed his laws and if not adhered to would result in punishment. For God to express a language that is counter to this cost the life of Jesus in order to communicate that message.

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross is a feast that reminds us as Christians of the symbol that the cross represents. Symbols are important and in order to understand a symbol we need to reflect on the

sense and meaning it. The sense and meaning of the cross are evident, it denotes the sacrifice that Christ made for us and it shows us the way to eternal life.

Within a place of Christian worship, a cross and/or cross is evident and a focal point for our prayers and may be similar in the Christian home. This symbol denotes that we are a follower of Christ, but in also making a sign of the cross we express our belief in the triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For others, a cross may be seen as morbid but for Christians it shows of victory over death, and reassurance of the resurrection.

The cross is an image has been used throughout history. One of the most enduring images is Salvador Dali's Saint John of the Cross currently being exhibited at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in my beloved city, Glasgow. Dali based his painting on a drawing by the 16th century Spanish friar, Saint John of the Cross. John was a mystic, Doctor of the Church. While praying at the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila John had a vision of the crucified Christ which led him to create his drawing of Christ from above. The drawing was placed in a small monstrance and kept in Avila. The drawing inspired Dali to create the work, Christ Saint of the Cross in 1951. Surprisingly, although this is a picture of the cross it is devoid of nails, blood and a crown of thorns. Dali was convinced in a dream that these features would mar his depiction of Christ. In speaking of his work, Dali said he had a cosmic dream seeing the image in colour and represented the nucleus of the atom. In a metaphysical sense for Dali he considered the Christ, the unity of the universe. This conversation continues with recent notable spiritual writers including Richard Rohr who speaks of Jesus as the Cosmic Christ.

I mention Saint John and Dali as it reminds me of our own unique encounter with Christ and what the image of Christ nailed to a cross means to me. I am struck that Christ chose the ultimate sacrifice, death on a cross that we may be reconciled with the Father. I am overwhelmed that he did this for home, for us, for the world.

However, this is not a one-way relationship. We are required to bear the cross, not to take the easy route, but through our baptism to speak the truth of the gospel. The cross remains our sign of victory, to look upon the cross reminds of hope in an increasingly material world.

Let this be our prayer, that we come to realise that our material existence comes at a cost to the earth and we recognise the creation of the earth and all that dwells within it belong to God and as such needs to be respected.

Father Tosh Lynch

Saint Mungo's Mission, Glasgow

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C – Luke 15, 1-32

In chapter 15 of St Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells three parables about losing, finding, and rejoicing. The outcasts of society, the tax collectors and the sinners approach Jesus eager to hear what he has to say. The Pharisees and scribes, still suspicious of Jesus, complain about him associating with sinners. So he tells them these three parables.

In the first story, the parable of The Lost Sheep, the shepherd leaves behind the 99 sheep to search for the 1 lost sheep. When he finds it, the shepherd rejoices with friends and neighbours. In the

same way, God rejoices more over 1 sinner who repents – like the outcasts who have come to hear Jesus – than over the 99 righteous like the Pharisees and scribes.

The second story, about a poor woman who will not stop searching until she finds her lost coin, makes the same point. Why are the Pharisees complaining when they should rejoice when the lost are found?

Finally, we come to what is probably the most memorable parable in the Gospels, the story we know as The Prodigal Son. Just as in The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin, this story is really about the seeker and the loving father is at the centre of this parable. Even though his son runs off with his father's inheritance and squanders the money, the father waits for him, hoping for his return. Upon his son's return, the father, “full of compassion,” runs out to embrace and forgive him before the son can utter one word of repentance. At this point the rejoicing begins.

As the title suggests, we usually concentrate our attention on the son who runs off to a far away land. It's understandable; we love redemption stories of people being raised up from the gutter. The story has happened in real life many times and there is a well-known and wonderful story about a man who had committed a crime for which he was deeply ashamed, and who, as a result of his actions, had been sent to prison.

In the last weeks of his prison sentence he wrote to his wife and family full of remorse for what he had done, letting them know that he would be out of prison soon, and asking whether they would be willing for him to come home. He would travel back to his home town on a bus, which would pass by the end of their street, and if they were willing to work with him to overcome all of the pain and embarrassment which he had caused to them then he would look for a sign which would indicate that he could leave the bus and approach the house.

The sign that he asked for was a single yellow ribbon hanging from the large tree at the end of the road. If he saw the ribbon hanging there then he would come to the house. If he didn't see the ribbon he would stay on the bus and travel on to the next town never to return. When the day of his journey came the man was in quite a state, so much so that he could not bear to open his eyes to look. The shape of the rest of his life depended on a single yellow ribbon.

As the bus approached the end of the street he asked the passengers, who by this stage had become interested in his story, to look out of the window on his behalf. As they passed the end of the road they excitedly persuaded him to open his eyes. And what he saw filled him with wonder and amazement. The tree at the end of the street was covered on every branch with yellow ribbons. The houses of the street had yellow ribbons flying from their windows, and lining the street his family and old friends and neighbours waved yellow ribbons to greet him, welcoming him home, ensuring that even before he disembarked from the bus he was in no doubt that they were not going to allow him to pass them by.

If you didn't know the whole story most of you will have heard the famous song:

*I'm coming home I've done my time,
And I have to know what is or isn't mine.
If you received my letter telling you I'd soon be free,
Then you'd know just what to do if you still want me.*

O tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree.

*It's been three long years, do you still want me?
If I don't see a ribbon round the old oak tree
I'll stay on the bus, forget about us,
Put the blame on me
If I don't see a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree.
...A simple yellow ribbon's all I need to set me free...
Now the whole bus is cheering and I can't believe I see
A hundred yellow ribbons round the old oak tree.*

The man was forgiven and welcomed back into his family. And that's what God does to anyone who comes to him and asks to be forgiven. God's yellow ribbon is the Cross of Jesus, his sign of forgiveness and acceptance.

In medieval times the parable was known as the "summary gospel," because as the Church heard the story again and again they recognised that it provided a summary of the whole of the good news of Jesus. The Gospel in one. The whole gospel abbreviated into a single story of images.

We need to trust that the Father (God) wants us home and that he will even leave the ninety-nine to find us; he will sweep the whole house until he finds us; he will wait expectantly for our return.

Fr. Julian Kent CFMD

Feast of St Matthew, The Apostle - Matthew 9, 9-13

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as Jesus[b] reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

If this was the only passage about Jesus, to survive, if all texts, except this, considered for the canon of scripture had somehow been lost, we would still have a lifetimes wealth of learning and spiritual growth to gain from this short passage.

Jesus calls Matthew to "follow him". Not worship him, not fawn over the Divine Incarnation..... but to follow, learn, imitate. It is the initiative of Jesus to call Matthew to follow him, not Matthews initiative to include Jesus as some sort of religious hobby in his life.

Fascinating to note the Pharisees do not approach Jesus to inquire about his reasons for such human intimacy with this group of people. They do not approach the "doctor." However, a little disconcerting that Jesus calls his eating companions 'sick' perhaps ? Jesus surely points to human need and human responses to our needs. If we are sick, we seek medical help. In the spiritual sense we are all in need of Jesus teaching as we are all sick, we all thirst. Our sickness and our thirst are the very gift of God, our own internal call to follow Jesus.

Thankfully this isn't the only passage about Jesus to exist. Even in this short passage though the tension, division, and a sense of double standards between so called 'religious' leaders and the people they are supposed to 'serve' is self evident. When read in conjunction with Matthew 23, it's clear Jesus doesn't have much time for "jobsworth" clerics.

Fr. Nick Young, St Gabriels, Liverpool

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C – Luke 16, 1-13

The Lord Jesus in today's Gospel, draws our attention and explains the matter that bothers many.

In today's example, Jesus puts before our eyes the figure of a dishonest steward, whom his master wants to remove from his office because of dishonesty. Faced with his end, the steward tries to solve the critical situation by committing a "smart" action in his favour. In the realities of that time in Galilee, landowners had stewards, people responsible for administering the estate. The steward decided to write off a part of the debts of his Master's borrowers in order to win their gratitude to himself. This way he would give up part of the profit that would normally go to him. The praise received by the steward is not for his dishonesty, but for his intelligence and cunning, which he demonstrated himself to possess. The main message of this Gospel is that we should always be aware that what we think we have does not belong to us, it belongs to God. And we are the stewards of these God's Gifts, which we are to be 'transferred' to others. Nothing that we have belongs to us - these are God's Gifts, and we will be thoroughly accountable for managing these Gifts. Let us give these gifts to others, and these are: love, goodness, smile, support and many more. Let's find them and don't let them go to waste.

In the Merciful Love of God - Fr. Michal CFMD

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C – Luke 16, 19-31

We have all heard claims of near-death experiences when the subject purports to have spent time at the entrance to heaven, seeing deceased loved ones, hearing celestial music, and walking towards heaven's gate. Before entering, however, God sent them back. There's even a best-selling book, "Heaven is for Real", wherein the author relates the near-death experience of his then three-year-old son. The book recounts his son's journey to heaven, where he personally met Jesus riding a rainbow-coloured horse and sat in Jesus's lap where angels sang songs to him. The book has sold over 10 million copies and was adapted into a feature film earning millions at the box office.

Whilst I think the subjective experiences of near-deathers do little to prove their claims, the sales record of books such as these certainly proves one thing – our culture is curious about, even obsessed with, the afterlife. We want to know what happens after death. What will we see? What will we feel? Does Jesus really have brown hair, blue eyes, and a rainbow coloured horse?

Rather than relying on the notoriously unreliable experiences of others, Christians ought to rely on Scripture which tells us, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him". These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God." (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

Through the inspiration of God, the authors of Scripture reveal to us what we could never otherwise have known. Scattered throughout Scripture we find windows through which we can peer into the afterlife. Specifically, the scriptures identify three different places, or realms, that lie beyond death's door. Those realms are Hades, Hell, and Heaven. The first of those realms is Hades – the “waiting room” of departed souls – what the Catholic Faith refers to as Purgatory (contrary to popular reputation, Purgatory is not a bad place but a neutral one of waiting and, for those who need it, of “purging” [or, washing / cleansing] – I surely need / want to go there!]).

I call it the “waiting room” because waiting is what we'll be doing there. Upon death, our disembodied spirits will journey immediately to this spiritual realm to await the Second Coming of Christ and the resurrection of our bodies. Of all the references to Hades throughout the Scriptures, none are more vivid than the one found in our gospel for today. There's none of this popularist, “He/She's in heaven now; He/She's propping up the bar / playing golf with the best in heaven / joining the great fishermen in the sky” type of pseudo-theology. We're not free to make it up as we go along – it's either true or it isn't! We're given a glimpse into how it's going to be so let's leave it there and leave speculation behind!

Listening to funeral eulogies over my years as a priest, it would seem that I've only ever buried saints – people without whom the world is a far poorer place. I hope that someone will say at my funeral service, “He tried; he tried his best at times, though not always. He'll have it all put right in the time he spends in Purgatory!”

Fr Julian Kent CFMD