

Homily for the Twenty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

Last Sunday I talked about the readings as a challenge to make a decision about our allegiance: will I follow Christ, or will I follow someone else; will I choose the God of our forebears, the Christian God, or will I choose another (albeit perhaps a God in secular dress, such as money, or pleasure, or praise). This weeks readings put before us another, related, choice. What sort of life of faith will I lead? Will I live a life where the externals are all very Christian indeed – saying my prayers, attending mass, going to confession, but where my heart is still rebellious; or will I live a life where my heart is given to God. We all know that there are two aspects to our relationships with other people. On the one hand there is what we say, what we do – what other people see and hear; on the other hand there is what we think, what we feel, that is things that other people do not see or hear. Today’s readings ask us this question: looking at my life of faith, my relationship with God, do the things I say and the things I do reflect what is going on in my heart, in my mind, or are the two aspects of my life at war with one another?

This is really a question about conversion. It is good to make a decision that I want to say and do the right things, but in the long run it is not enough. The outward observances of our faith, the things that other people see, are good, because they help us to form good habits: it is better to come to mass with an unconverted heart than not to come at all. But we must realise that acquiring these habits is a staging post, it is one step along the road, it is not the final destination. This is precisely the point that Jesus is trying to make to the Pharisees when he quotes Isaiah to them: “This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me”. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the outward signs of faith and devotion that the Pharisees practice if they are a natural expression of what is going on in the person’s heart. If someone ritually washes their hands in order to express a genuine and heart-felt desire to be purified from their sinful thoughts and actions, then that can only be a good thing; but if someone washes their hands as a substitute for seeking real purity, if that hand washing is done to avoid the need to change the way I live, it becomes a distraction – more than a distraction, it becomes a kind of lie. My body is saying one thing while my mind is thinking something else.

Where does this leave us in practice? It leaves us with a challenge that each of us must confront in the privacy of our own hearts, each of us must face alone. It asks us, what are the things that really matter to me. It challenges us to look at the most secret inner part of ourselves, and see what we find there. Somewhere within each of us, simply because we are human beings, there is a point of stillness where God dwells, and where all is well. This place can often be buried very deep. It can be hidden beneath all the distractions, and the demands of everyday life; it can be buried by our own sense of vulnerability, by the wounds and the injuries of the past. Most of the time we simply forget that it is there, or we try to avoid ever looking at it too deeply for fear that it will show up so much that we take for granted as just pointless frippery. We cannot spend our whole lives in that place, of course, because we have to get on with the practicalities of the world, but all the same we must not forget this hidden place within. The readings of today’s mass ask us to visit that place, and to connect once more with God who dwells inside. They remind us that God is not only remote and distant, he is also within us.

Maintaining this contact with God within, keeping in touch with that part of me that can never be destroyed, never undone, however well we may choose to keep it hidden, is a part of the purpose of prayer, but it is also a part of the purpose of liturgy. We come to mass so that the God present within us, who is also present on the altar, can expand to fill our hearts. It is very tempting when we come to mass to be seduced into feeling that we need to be active all the time, that we need constantly to be physically doing something, but this is not so. What happens at the altar is what happens in Heaven, adoration of Christ, the lamb who was slain. So the work we have to do at mass is all internal, it is all about training my eyes to see what is really happening, all about concentrating on living this hour or so in a rather different way from every other hour of the week. The purpose of mass is not to be busy, but to receive as a pure gift the vision of eternity, where all the citizens of Heaven gather around God's throne simply to worship him and to bask in the warm rays of his glory. We just need to open our minds to God, we simply need to say 'here I am Lord' and then to let him go to work on us. We open ourselves completely to him, allowing him to shine the light of his love into us, and while all this is going on that place where he dwells within us is refreshed, replenished, reinvigorated.

So, today's readings ask us to have the courage to delve deep inside, to the only place within that really matters, pushing aside all the false idols, the temporary, passing priorities, and to rest for a little while in the presence of God. This is the only way that we will be able to do what St James suggests, that is to be involved in the practical needs of others, but at the same time remaining uncontaminated by the world. There is always something of a balancing act to be done between engaging with the practicalities of the world, which risks losing touch with God so that we end up guided by purely material things, and on the other hand remaining uninvolved with the world, which may preserve our connection with God but also prevents us making God present in the lives of others. If we want to live fully human lives we dare not withdraw from God, nor dare we withdraw from other people. It is the priestly role of the people of God to be the bridge that unites the two, and we can only do this if we allow not only our words and our gestures but also our hearts to be converted.