

Homily for The Twenty Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (27/09/09)

There is a strange paradox at the heart of today's gospel reading. It begins with Jesus trying to expand the horizons of the disciples (again!). They have tried to stop a man from casting out devils in Jesus' name 'because he was not one of us'. There is something faintly chilling about this 'not one of us' approach. Excluding people who are not like us is a perennial problem for people, whenever they come together in some sort of group. It is always easy to belong to a group of people who have similar backgrounds, similar views, similar habits. We know where we stand with them, and they don't rock the boat too much. This might apply to a town or a village who struggle to accept a stranger who comes to live and work with them, or it might apply to a country that finds it difficult to accept people from outside, or it can even apply to a church that doesn't want to be shaken up too much from its familiar patterns of doing things by someone new. It is much easier to carry on as we have always done, so we make it clear that people who are not like us are not really welcome. We might do that quite explicitly, or we might be much more subtle, passing on the message through all sorts of unspoken communications. Human beings as a group are very clever at producing systems of reward and punishment, that subtly make it clear to the difficult newcomer that if they conform they will be welcomed, but if they insist on being different they will be kept safely on the edge.

We shouldn't be too harsh on the disciples. They thought that they were doing the right thing, and in fairness they were not trying to protect their own positions, their own status; rather like Joshua in the first reading who was anxious to protect Moses' reputation and his position, the disciples are anxious to protect Jesus, to make sure that he is in control of what is going on. All the same, Jesus has to expand their field of vision a little, and show them that the gospel is radically inclusive, that no one is to be excluded.

So far, so good, but Jesus then talks in graphic terms about discarding body parts that might lead us into sin. How does violent language connect with his gentle inclusiveness? In fact, on closer inspection, what does it all mean? How can your eye,

or your foot cause you to sin? Isn't it our minds that cause the problem? How can we connect the two parts of this gospel reading? The answer, I think, is that the paradox of this gospel passage simply expresses the paradox at the heart of the gospel:

Christianity is, at the same time, both incredibly simple and incredibly difficult. It is simple in the sense that it is open to anyone. You don't have to be a certain age, or a certain social class; you don't have to be clever, you don't have to have some special secret knowledge. Everyone is welcomed. All you need to do is say 'That is what I want'. Christianity is radically inclusive, because the church is everybody's home, everybody belongs here. There is no question of will they fit in, shall we allow them in or not. There is no question of will they belong - everybody belongs, simply by virtue of being human.

That is one side of the paradox. Everyone belongs, the Church is everybody's home, plain and simple. The other side, however, is that while following Jesus is something very simple on one level, on another level it is very costly. If we want to follow him, we have to offer him everything. He will help us to be re-formed, reshaped, renewed, he will help us to become more truly ourselves, more truly human, but he will only do that with our co-operation. There may be aspects of our lives that we have become very attached to, things we are reluctant to give up on, but all the same they stand between us and God, they make us less truly human, and they have got to go. Of course we don't have to cut away parts of our bodies to become less sinful, but we may have to cut away aspects of our lives that seem really to be a part of who we are, because they are holding us back. I can live a life of doing as I please, which will from time to time be pleasurable but in the long run it will leave me unsatisfied. To choose a life of doing as I should is much more challenging; sometimes I will have to give up things that give me pleasure (or take up things that give me no pleasure) simply trusting that in the long run this will make me more human, and therefore more fulfilled. This runs very much against the grain of our present day culture, and that makes it even harder to sustain. In the end, as with much of our Christian life, it comes down to a question of love: who do I love most. The challenge of today's gospel, with its graphic amputations, is really a challenge to self-love. It is true that the Church is radically open and inclusive: everyone is welcome. At the same time, everyone within it faces the same challenge, the challenge to become more like

Christ, and in doing that to become more truly human, more truly myself, which is the source of real happiness. So, with every day I need to love God a little more, and to love myself a little less. Every self-indulgence, every surrender to temptation, every choice to do what please me rather than to do what is right, is a triumph of self-love. The gospel makes the same challenge to everyone: do we dare to let go of that self-love? Can we bear to admit that it is there, and to bring it into the open, to acknowledge it, and to lay it aside. No-one is asking us to hate ourselves, nor even to deny ourselves pleasure and comfort. But we are gently being invited to be a little less obsessed with loving ourselves. God loves every one of us, and really his love is enough to be going on with.

The Christian Church is the ultimate in equality. Everyone is welcome and the same high standards are expected of all.