

A Homily for 17th Sunday of the Year, 26th July 2020
from Fr Allan

For some reason when I was looking at today's gospel especially and reading through the parables of the hidden treasure and the fine pearl, I began to think of the radio programme "Desert Island Discs"! I suppose I began to think about things that people consider to be important in their lives. The people who are invited onto Desert Island Discs are asked to choose music they consider important, they are offered copies of the Bible and the Works of William Shakespeare (which the programme considers important) and then they are asked to choose ONE piece of music above the others AND a luxury item. In an entertaining way we are given a glimpse of the core, the essence of the person. We come to know their priorities and what "drives" them.

In the first reading from the first book of Kings, the Lord asks Solomon something similar. He says, "Ask what you would like me to give you". In effect it's a test. The Lord wants to know Solomon's priorities. Of course, Solomon passes the test - he's Solomon! He says, "Give your servant a heart to understand how to discern between good and evil". The Lord gives him a heart wise and shrewd as none before you has had and none will have after you. It's the right answer. Solomon's most important song and his luxury is 'understanding', it's 'wisdom'.

In St Matthew's chapter of parables the first two go together. In both the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl the one doing the hunting and searching has already come to an understanding of what is important in life. They know the value of things. Without this they wouldn't know the importance of the treasure or the value of the pearl. Our treasure is knowing the Good News that has been shown to us by Jesus Christ.

In both parables the discovery of the treasure and the pearl is accompanied by (maybe) shock and surprise. However, it is in great joy that the person involved risks everything for the sake of what he has found. In the same way the discovery that in Jesus the Rule of God has come is also accompanied by great joy. Joy should be the overwhelming atmosphere of the Christian community. Amongst the early group of believers the joy that was felt through coming to know the risen Lord was like nothing they had ever experienced. Whatever risks they had to take were worth their while.

From the very beginning the Church called the proclamation about Jesus of Nazareth "Gospel". It means "Good News". This was a term that didn't have its roots in the Church. Good News was a term used by kings and rulers. It was used when an heir was born, or when a successor was enthroned or when the king had been victorious in battle. So, the Christian community framed its Good News - what God had done in Jesus. This Good News wasn't surrounded by solemnity or even reverence. When the Good News was mentioned, talked about in the community it was done with joyfulness - it was a joyful proclamation. It permeated the whole community. Everything that the people had waited for so long, all their private and public aspirations had been fulfilled. The sense of discovery did away with any other considerations.

If we come to the Good News without joy we can err on the side of masochism. It is only in joy that the Christian will be able to renounce her or himself to take on the life of self-denial according to the pattern laid out by Jesus. Reaching out to the sick, the suffering, the

unemployed, the bereaved, to those who are in any kind of need, WITHOUT Christian joy, somehow misses the mark. It doesn't present the complete picture.

The antiphon for mass today says: "God is in his holy place, God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might and strength to his people". This should make us very happy! First of all, I would like to wish one of our young parishioners - Lizzy de Ste Croix, a very Happy 21st Lockdown Birthday!" It will certainly be a memorable one. I hope that it won't be too long before you can celebrate with friends and family!

Of course, every year stands out in its own particular way. None of us will ever forget 2020. However, 1995 stands out for three particular reasons. It was the year that a 19-year-old man of colour won what had previously been the preserve of a slightly older white man, the Masters at Augusta. It was also the year that a landlocked country won the Americas Cup yacht race. And it was also the year that a film about a disabled man with special needs who overcame incredible odds won the Oscar for Best Picture. Many of you will know that the golfer was Tiger Woods; the landlocked country was Switzerland and the film was Forrest Gump. While we are encouraged to succeed, (sometimes at all costs) and we like a "winner", there are many occasions when we relish and enjoy the way that the "underdog" overcomes all of the burdens that come their way.

A while ago a very popular book in Catholic circles was "The God of Surprises" by Gerald Hughes. Yes, God continues to surprise us through the events of our lives. Gerald Hughes wrote God of Surprises for those who find it hard to forgive themselves. He wrote it for those who are confused and bewildered, 'the stumblers and agnostics who hardly dare to believe that God is within them".

I mention all of this because I think that "the unexpected" in the form of the underdog, the powerless and the humble, features in our reading's today from the prophet Zechariah and the Gospel of St Matthew.

Zechariah was one of the minor prophets. This doesn't mean that he was any less important than the major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel. It means his body of work wasn't as extensive as the major prophets. His message was just as important. He was a great influence on Jesus himself. If you read the first reading over again you will recognise the similarity with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we know as Palm Sunday. Jesus' life and words reflect the kind of leadership/kingship that Zechariah puts forward as the ideal of the new era of the new David.

The year 587 BC was the year that the people of Israel were taken into captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed. Fifty years later it will be rebuilt. It will be rebuilt not only as a sign for enemies. It will be rebuilt because the people really thought of themselves as chosen by God. They would become the leaders for all the nations of the earth. Zechariah is the voice of God urging them to be good leaders. Their king will bring joy and happiness. He will be close to his people. He will know his people. The weapons of war will disappear. An era of peace and justice will stretch from "sea to sea". This new "David" will not be a king of war and power OVER his people. He will be humble and caring.

In all of this Zechariah is something of a voice crying in the wilderness. His words seem a world away from the reality of the people. It is hard for them to imagine such a leader.

Nevertheless, he encourages them. His promises will never be realised during his own lifetime. In this respect he might be considered as a failure. However, the people still hope. They always remember his words. The ones who remember and keep this promise alive are the little ones who remain faithful.

Perhaps Jesus was heavily influenced by Zechariah when he thanked his Father for “hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children”. Unexpectedly it is children who are closest to God’s heart, not necessarily those who keep laws that don’t come from God or even those who lead orderly lives - it is those who are childlike who will understand and accept the true message of his Good News. Being childlike means that we have complete faith and trust in God. We have no doubt of his love for us. When a father throws his child into the air, the child usually cries “More, More!” A child has no fear that the father will allow them to fall. In biblical times children were without power or status. This makes Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel both radical and revolutionary. We are called to lead lives that will sometimes “upset the apple cart” or the “status quo” - even when this will be hard and difficult. The call to be radical and the call to face the hard and difficult times will definitely come. Remember that God is a God who surprises. However, also remember that it is precisely when we feel overwhelmed and overburdened that we should turn to God. God is waiting to catch us when we think we are falling.