

St Mary the Immaculate - Grantham

Sunday 25th July. Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Commentaries on the Readings

We often hear life described in sermons or religious writing as a pilgrimage, and so it is, I've written about it as such in these commentaries. What we don't hear or read so very often is life described as a puzzle, and yet it is. Why are we here? Where are we going? What is it all about? If there is an all-powerful, all-loving God then why...etc., etc. Perhaps that is because sermons and religious writings are usually aimed at explaining, encouraging or uplifting, not raising questions or sowing doubts. That being the case I have to admit that I have a problem with this Sunday's Readings. On the face of it they do not make very much sense to me. If anything they merely

compound the puzzle that is life. However, I will attempt to make a virtue of necessity and use the fact that I find them all singularly unhelpful as my theme for this Sunday's commentaries – there never were, and there never will be, any simple answers. I base this decision on that famous quote "When certainty stalks the land the prudent man climbs a tree and pulls it up after him." (© J. Green 2010 all rights reserved including the Latin, Greek and Hebrew) or, to put it another way "If a man will begin with certainties he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." (Francis Bacon 1561-1626).

First Reading

Genesis 18:20-32

Then the Lord said, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.'

So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham came near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' And the Lord said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Again he spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' He said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.'

As it stands our first Reading seems no more than a piece of bargaining by Abraham and not very good bargaining, more like some sort of numbers game. But where is the lesson for us? Should we try to bargain with God and, if so, should we push it as far as Abraham did? And why was Abraham bargaining for Sodom and Gomorrah? Apparently they were awful places. The answer could be in the Abraham story from last Sunday when Abraham first meets the strangers who turn out to be God and two accompanying angels. Abraham may not be bargaining nor even trying to placate God's anger at the dwellers of the two cities. What he might be doing is trying to work out what sort of God has visited him. His real question is not about numbers but about the justice – "Are you really going to destroy the just man with the sinner?" This God is all-powerful, but will he also be all-just? Power and justice didn't usually go together in Abraham's day. If God will be judge of everything in his creation what sort of judgement will he hand down? Looking at it this way we see that Abraham is not playing with numbers, from fifty just men to ten, he is slowly working his way to the individual. If one good person is surrounded by wicked will they all perish together? God's answer is that he judges each person as an individual, the righteous need not fear his justice. And that is the best lesson I can find in this reading, we are each one of us answerable as individuals to God. We may live in difficult times when all sorts of wickedness seems not only to prevail but be trumpeted as the right thing to do. If that is so, then the greatest temptation of our lives might be to conform to the majority and become one of the crowd. But if we know the crowd are wrong we must stick to being the odd-one-out no matter what the cost. It's not easy to be asked to fly in the face of everyone else's certainty and, I suspect, horribly difficult to actually do. But what's the alternative? To be wrong in exactly the same way as everyone else!

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Second Reading

Colossians 2:12-14

When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

In our second Reading we're still with Paul trying to get the Church at Colossae back onto the right path. This particular extract is full of imagery which I find very difficult: "...buried with Christ when you were baptised..." "...you were dead because you were sinners and had not been circumcised..." "He has... cancelled every record of debt that we had to pay...by nailing it to a cross." I know what it means but I find it almost impossible to relate to the world I live in.

However, if I go beyond the words I find that the Church at Colossae was not so different from the Church in which I find myself. They were assailed by the cleverly argued certainties of those around them and naturally they found themselves confused and doubtful which, I think, is the normal state of many Christians in our modern developed world. But we can't ignore the people we live amongst any more than the Christians at Colossae could.

The best proof of the existence of God I ever read was by a man of unshakeable certainty. Richard Dawkins in his book, *The God Delusion*, argues the non-existence of God by a regression as opposed to Thomas Aquinas' progression. He says, go back, and what do you come to – nothing! And I suddenly saw he was right – nothing! And his nothing fitted exactly what I know of God; something absolutely unknowable, beyond human comprehension, out of which every created thing sprang and continues to spring. A nothing that we can only know through its own revelation to us, the creatures it created. Richard Dawkins didn't mean to help me along, he meant to do the opposite. But God works in mysterious ways.

The Colossians were beset by proto-Gnostics and we are beset by Richard Dawkins & Co. The Gnostics were certain then, Richard Dawkins is certain now, and in between there has been every manner of certainty hurled at the Church. And the Christian survives all that certainty in doubt and confusion supported by one absolutely dependable asset – faith in Christ. Paul's images may not fit easily into our understanding, but his utter conviction is clear, word it how you like - keep the faith as you were given it and hand it on.

The Gospel

Luke 11:1-13

The Lord's Prayer

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.'

Perseverance in Prayer

And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him." And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

The Gospel shows us Jesus teaching the apostles how to pray by giving them the words that came to be known as the "Our Father...". This prayer is so well-known there is nothing I can add in the way of commentary.

But the subsequent teachings we get in this extract are a bit problematic. A neighbour who needs bread for a visitor rouses a friend who has gone to bed, a simple conclusion is that Jesus is trying to drive home the idea that prayer needs persistence. "...if the man does not...give it to him for friendship's sake, persistence will be enough..."

But is this not contradicted by what follows? "Ask and it will be given...search and you will find..." and so on. Surely Jesus is saying God is a generous and willing giver, what you ask of him you will receive. "If you then, who are evil know how to give your children what is good how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" Prayer is so central to religion and yet so difficult to explain or understand. God knows what we need before we ask, so why must we ask? Why praise God in prayer, it can add nothing to his glory so what is it for? Does prayer work? I don't know the answer to any of these questions. Perhaps the answer is nothing to do with what we say, the words we use in prayer. Perhaps the answer is that time spent in God's presence is never wasted whatever words we use. There was a phrase in vogue not so long ago 'quality time'. Maybe that's what prayer is, trying to give a bit of our time, quality time, to God.

Maybe that's what Jesus is saying, make time in your life for God, he doesn't need it but you do. You can never be sure what good it does you in practical terms nor whether your words will be answered in any way that you will understand. But, in a world of certainties that so often fail, a doubt that might succeed is surely worth a little persistence and effort.