

Homily for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary time 2023 Year A

Christ's words in today's Gospel, "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect", is in one sense to ask the impossible because nobody can ever approach the perfection that is God. But if we look at the idea of perfection itself, it opens up for us real possibilities. To be perfect is not to want or lack in anything, to be utterly complete and integrated in every aspect of your being. That, for a human being is out of our reach, at least this side of eternity. Only when we are in complete possession of God, who is perfection itself, could it be said that we are perfect.

Perfection is an ideal, a standard that can be aimed for in certain areas of our lives, but it is an ideal that can never be fully achieved, because we do not know exactly what perfection is. Every standard or ideal state is relative and subjective. My idea of, for example, physical perfection might be totally different to yours. Our standards are conditioned by so many things, where we live, how old we are, our tastes and our capacities.

If there is one thing you can say about perfection, it is that if you ever feel that you have achieved it, then you most certainly have not. Perfection implies no further room for development, but that is not how it is with human experience. If we are alive, our lives and the way we live them are forever open-ended. Nothing stands still in a state of perfect repose. We are in a state of constant transition or change; we are incomplete. But we can and should aspire to perfection. The Church has always provided us with models of holiness and perfection in her canonized Saints.

Canonization is a statement by the Church that that particular person is now with God in Heaven. It also means that that person's heroic virtue is being held up to us to admire and to imitate.

The Saints are models of holiness and perfection.

Now if you think about it, that creates a bit of a problem, because practically all canonised Saints were priests, monks, nuns, virgins, widows or martyrs, and that leaves a greater part of the church, the ordinary layperson, very much a second-class citizen. Where are the Saints who lead full and active married lives, raise families, work hard in perhaps dead-end jobs for a living, and died alone and forgotten in an old persons home?

Perhaps the greater part of the Church has for far too long been given the wrong models or examples of holiness and perfection to live up to. We need a greater variety of models of holiness aspire to. That is not to deny the greatness of some of the canonized Saints of the Church, but it is to say that the monastic holiness that some of them lived is not very helpful or appropriate to the shop assistant, the bank clerk, the labourer who digs the roads, or the single parent struggling to raise a young family. Yet all are called to perfection, and the implications in that is if you do not live your life like a monk or a nun, or shed your blood for your faith, then you are of the second rank, and cannot be taking your call to perfection seriously.

I bet if I asked you now, you would have settled long ago for the idea that sanctity was just for a special group of people who had the time and circumstances to pursue it, and you, well you tried your best now and then, and you hope to squeeze into Heaven. But that would be so wrong.

The call to strive to perfection, and to try again and again and again is a universal one. Perish the thought, but we cannot all be monks or nuns or virgins or widows or martyrs. The possibility of genuine holiness is to be found in other areas of life and it is about time we held some of those other models up for examination.

Sanctity is not only to be found in taking oneself out of the world, it must be found also in the full engagement with life.

Sanctity is not only to be found in abstaining from sexuality, but it must also be found in the legitimate and joyful exercise of sexuality.

Sanctity is not only be found in dying for one's faith, but also often far more heroic to live day by day in witness to your faith.

Sanctity is not just in great and extraordinary things, it must also be found in the simple, the routine, the ordinary demands of life.

Christ never meant the ideal of sanctity or perfection to be removed from the reality of the lives that ordinary people try to live. We would be surprised at the greatness of some of the ordinary people around us. Indeed they themselves would be surprised, because we have got so used to the idea of only a few special models of holiness.

We all need somehow a wider variety of models of holiness to show us the goodness in the lives that we are already leading and what we are still capable of.

If the Church is slow in providing them, then why not look to Christ Himself. When God became Man he sanctified the ordinary human way of living, the capacity for goodness that is in people that needs to be drawn out.

Christ was born in a stable, so He knew poverty. His family were homeless and fled to Egypt, so they were refugees and exiled. Christ earned His living by the work of His hands and lived a normal family life for 30 years. He was misunderstood, betrayed, and deserted by some of his closest friends. He was persecuted, tortured, and put to death.

The experience of Christ covers most of the spectrum of ordinary human living, and throughout those 33 years there is a marked faithfulness to obligations, values, commitments, caring, sensitivity, compassion, and love. He had concern for the truth and the healthy growth and development of other people together with simplicity of life, forgiveness, and regular prayer.

All of that is within the reach of everyone here if we set our minds and hearts to it. The ordinary manner of day-to-day living, and the bricks by which we build up our sanctity, our living temples of the Holy Spirit.

The task of perfection or holiness this side of eternity is to become a whole person. To be not only who you are but the best of who you are.