

Homily for the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

It was a great relief after three months to be able to have a haircut this week. The hairdresser I go to is also called Robin. He is from Iraq. Once while sitting in the chair having my hair cut a friend of his came into the shop and they talked in a language I did not know. When I asked him afterwards what it was he said, Aramaic, the language of Our Lord.

Jesus and his disciples would have known Hebrew, the language of their religion and its rituals, but in daily life they probably conversed in Aramaic, which is still spoken today in some areas of the Middle East. Jesus used Aramaic in his teaching, in speaking to people about God. It may be that parts of the New Testament such as the Gospels were originally written or composed in Aramaic and only later translated into Greek. There are a few Aramaic words preserved in the Greek Testament, such as *Abba*, which Jesus uses to address his Father, and *Maranatha*, a prayer word that means Come, Lord.

People who study these matters say that Aramaic is very different from modern European languages. It has an earthiness, a rootedness in the natural world, and a kind of open-endedness, so that words often have a variety of meanings that cannot be reduced to one fixed meaning. You can perhaps see why it would be particularly appropriate for the stories told by Jesus that we call parables, which often use illustrations drawn from the natural world and encourage an openness in our understanding of God rather than confining God to a set of single fixed ideas.

Jesus told the people many things in parables, we read one in this Sunday's Gospel. We might wonder why he chooses this way of teaching about God, telling a story with a hidden meaning: why not just tell them directly?

Another method he uses is comparison or analogy: rather than saying the kingdom of God is X, Y, Z, he asks, 'What is the kingdom of God *like*? To what shall we compare it?'

This feature of Our Lord's teaching reminds me also that when people ask him questions about God he often does not give a straight answer, but turns the question round. He is quite like the man in a joke who is asked, 'Are you the person who always answers every question with another question?' He replies, 'Who told you that?' Sometimes those who ask Jesus questions do not really want to know the answer. They think they know it already and want him to tell them how great they are, or they are trying to catch him out with trick questions, as he is well aware: should we pay taxes to Caesar or God? and so on. Jesus will not play these little games.

In the parable of the sower and the seed that we hear this Sunday Jesus unusually gives his disciples the key to the story - after a puzzling section in which he seems to be suggesting that the mysteries of the kingdom are not to be imparted to everyone, but only to those who have the ability to accept them. I have often wondered about this, but never been able to fathom it. (Whenever you find something puzzling in Scripture you might look up a commentary and often will find nothing said: this means that none of the scholars know the answer either!). If the people's hearts have grown coarse and hardened, as Jesus says, surely he would want to soften them and help them to understand. There were religions in the ancient world in which the knowledge of God or the gods was kept secret and only divulged to specially initiated people. The Christian religion does have a certain element of this, but on the whole it was and is a religion for everyone. God in Christ makes himself totally available to all people and the only qualification needed to receive him is the desire to do so.

Something we can notice about the parables is that although they use pictures drawn from the natural and human worlds they are not *about* those worlds: no farmer, for instance, would ever scatter his seed all over the place in that careless way, but rather make sure it went into the furrows he had prepared. The parables are first and foremost about the kingdom of God which we can experience here and now in the world in which we live, but which we cannot know here and now totally or completely. God must always go beyond our understanding and cannot be confined within human categories of thinking: he *is* a God who scatters his seed far and wide indiscriminately, because it is his nature to give himself unstintingly, unreservedly, unconditionally to everyone.

I think this is the reason why Jesus uses the open-ended teaching methods of parable and analogy. We cannot understand God fully, but only suggest something of what God

is like. Our human words are inadequate to the task, since the nature of God and God's kingdom just cannot be encapsulated in short or simple forms of words. As some say, we cannot know God by thinking, we can only know God in the personal response of love, since God is love.

I believe it is all-important for religion that God should be mystery and that what we are prepared to say about God should always be discreet and provisional. One of the most terrible temptations religious people can face is to think that they have got God properly and fully worked out and know everything about God there is to be known. This supposed privileged knowledge is so often used as a weapon with which to beat others who have a different take on God and can justify any amount of inhuman treatment of other people who do not measure up to our standards or agree with our line. The churches, sad to say, have often thought they were right to persecute and even kill those whom they decided did not hold "correct" views of God. Such are the perversions we are led to if we believe that we, our side, our group has the right ideas and everyone else is wrong. Religious institutions of course are by no means alone in behaving like this.

This does not mean that in relation to God anything goes, we can believe anything we like, but the best and safest assumption we can make is that God is love. We can argue about what exactly this means in each case, but it is surely obvious that thinking we are right to maltreat others we judge to be wrong cannot possibly accord with belief in a loving God. And that is something that can only be known in the actual circumstances of people's lives: our thinking can never be a substitute for the difficult and exacting business of working out what is the loving thing to do in practice. It is our thinking that leads us astray in the way we practice our beliefs.

The first reading on this Sunday from the Old Testament is a short excerpt from chapter 55 of the prophecy of Isaiah which says that God's word is *efficacious*: it carries out what God wills. The previous section is one of my favourite parts of Scripture and I think one of the most important. God says to us, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways. Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts.' I want to say, thank God for that.

In the pattern of readings, we follow at Sunday Mass the first reading and the Gospel relate to each other in some way, but the second reading follows an independent course through the letters of St. Paul or in Eastertide the Acts of the Apostles. This Sunday we have part of the very fine chapter 8 of Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he speaks of the glorious liberty of the children of God which the whole of creation is destined, in God's design, to share. A vision like this can give us hope to persevere through difficult circumstances knowing that God is always beckoning us onward and leading us further into the heart of his love for us and for all creation. Even Coronavirus cannot prevent the fulfilment of God's plan!

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

Fr Robin is happy to receive any comments or questions you may have. He can be contacted at robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk