

Homily for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

A few days ago I was able to visit Kew Gardens and sat by the lake enjoying a picnic, looking at the water, the trees and the wildfowl. At one point a large flotilla of Canada geese, about a dozen or fifteen of them, came floating by, closely packed and seemingly very purposeful in what they were doing. A little later they returned, swimming in the opposite direction, still appearing to have some definite purpose in mind, but what it was I have no idea. Maybe they were just enjoying the sensation of the water, their smooth movement through it and their being together. Several other people who were around clearly took great pleasure in looking at the wildlife, and indeed I think human beings in general do find the natural world a source of endless fascination. Think of all the many television programmes about the wonders and marvels of creation.

The natural world has this quality for us because it is, simply, given. We did not create it, it is just there and goes on its way with no regard for human beings, except for the ducks wanting some of my picnic! As religious people we believe it is the creation of God, the author of all life, of everything that is. Some people speak of the Two Books of God. One is the written record of Scripture, which we have had for about 3,000 years, but the other is the book of creation that has lasted for much longer, the world around us, which is a sign of God's creative love. It carries no message other than that it is, but because of that can be a means for us of pleasure and comfort. Jesus even says that if you are weighed down by the burdens of life and perhaps feeling adrift from God, go to the natural world: look at the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. They give delight merely by existing. As the book of Wisdom says, 'there is no god other **than you, who cares for everything,**' and if **God cares for the animals and the world of nature,** will he not much more care for us?

We saw last week that in teaching about the kingdom of God Jesus tends to follow oblique methods of telling stories and suggesting comparisons. The stories that we call parables often use illustrations drawn from the natural world, but sometimes with a twist. In the Gospel reading for this Sunday Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a man sowing wheat in his field, in which, when he is asleep, an enemy comes and sows weeds.

If you try to pull out the weeds, you might pull out the good seed as well, so you must wait until both have ripened together, then you can safely remove the weeds. Again this time Jesus gives an explanation of the parable, referring it to the end-time when there will be a sorting out of good and bad. But maybe we can also see it as showing that sometimes we just need to let things take their own course. We cannot always direct events in our world (how well we know that at the present time), but must wait to see how they work out. The decisive moment is not yet.

In the Sunday Gospel Jesus uses another image of the kingdom of God as a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds which can grow into a great shrub. I once brought back from the Holy Land a box of mustard seeds and left some of them out in the church for people to take. The little pods contain lots of tiny seeds, each one of which can grow into a full plant. I never found out how people fared with them, but maybe in due course there were mustard plants all over Ealing. Once you plant the seed the kingdom will grow as it will and we may never know what becomes of our sowing – we can only leave that to God.

It is an article of faith that God is at work in our world, bringing all things to good, but a lot of the time we will not know how this is happening, we can only trust that it is. If we do believe that we and everything else is created in love by God (creation is an act of love), we will know that in the end we can only hand everything over to him and allow him to act as he, and not we, desire.

Our task is to allow God to be God in us and for us, and this is why the message of St. Paul in the second reading of this Sunday's Mass is so important. In the key chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans Paul says that sometimes we do not know what to pray for, but:-

The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness.

For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly,

the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words,

and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means,

and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit

are according to the mind of God.

A lot of prayer and worship consists of our words directed to God, asking him for what we need or desire: to heal the sick, bring peace to the world, bless our relations and friends, and so on. Jesus does indeed say we should ask God for what we want, but he also says that when you pray you do not need a lot of words, but can be very simple, resting in the presence of God whose Spirit dwells within us. The great teachers of prayer in fact say that prayer is not so much what we do or say, but the Spirit of God, of Jesus praying within us. What we do is allow that prayer to happen in us and seek to be in touch, in harmony with it.

More and more, I believe, we need to move from prayer as overmuch talking to or at God to more of the listening, resting in his presence, handing everything over to him in faith and trust. To take time to be still and quiet, not saying anything in particular, but being there, letting go of our own thoughts and concerns, will always be a good thing to do. It will help us to develop a sense of attentiveness to God present in all things, which can then grow and inform everything we do, everything we are. This is our vocation as God's people: to be people who know God in themselves and knowing him are able to live from the deep centre which is the Spirit of God poured into our hearts.

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