

Homily for the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

Oh come to the water, all you who are thirsty;

though you have no money, come!

Buy corn without money and eat,

and at no cost wine and milk.

These words from the first reading of [this Sunday's](#) Mass come from one of my most favourite parts of Scripture, chapter 55 of the prophecy of Isaiah. (We had another short excerpt from this chapter two Sundays ago).

They might strike us at first as a little crazy. How can you buy food and drink without money? If all goods produced were distributed free of cost our economy would soon break down. Apart from anything else it would be very unfair on farmers if things were managed in this way. But, as we have been seeing the last few weeks, the kingdom of God is not about fair deals and exact justice in worldly terms: it is the expression of God's love which goes beyond all our human ideas of what is right and just. The same chapter of Isaiah has God says to us, 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways ... the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts.'

You might think to yourself: am I happy with a God like this? We all tend to see God in ways that we can understand and relate to and often as it were cut him down to human size. Think for example of the parable of the prodigal son and the interesting figure of the elder brother.



He is the one who has stayed at home, worked hard, done everything his father has asked him to do - and there is nothing wrong with this; to a certain extent it is right and admirable. We are all, I imagine, brought up to think that the way to get on in the world is to please our parents and teachers, win their approval by being good and obedient and then reap the reward for being so: success, reputation, riches.

The elder brother, however, is also the one who cannot share his father's delight in welcoming back the delinquent younger brother, the one who has squandered everything his father gave him, made a mess of his life and reached the lowest point of degradation and despair. Sometimes you have to come to that point in order to realise where your true self is to be found - at home. As is said, home is the place where they have to take you back whether they want to or not!

I once had an experience of home in this way when I made a bad decision about my future and had gone off to start on a new course, but discovered quite soon that it was quite wrong for me. I felt very out of place and could not carry on, but had nowhere else to go except back to my parents' home from where I had set out. I decided not to forewarn them in advance, but just set off on the journey home. In truth I felt a little foolish and ashamed, and like the prodigal in the story tried to work out on the way what I could say, how I could explain things. So imagine my delight when I did get back home and my parents seemed surprised certainly - I was supposed to be away for several months and was there again in a few days - but also pleased to see me and not much interested in my explanation - perhaps they knew something that I didn't!

It was not that serious a mistake and I found a new job quite easily (this was some years ago), but it showed me something crucially important about parenthood and about the parenthood of God, which is that *love is not dependent upon merit*. God loves us not because we deserve it by being good, but because he is good. This is the error the elder brother falls into. He thinks that by working hard, keeping his nose clean, being good and obedient he has earned his father's love and really deserves it. He is so caught up in his own feelings about himself that he cannot bring himself to share his father's joy. In the famous picture of this scene by Rembrandt he stands to one side, tall and aloof, looking scornfully down on the tender reunion of father and younger son, shut out because he is shutting himself out from their delight.

Yet, as his father says, 'everything I have is yours.' He is not missing anything if his father chooses to be generous to others, but so long as he thinks he has to earn his father's love he makes it impossible for himself to receive it. Love, genuine love, is a free gift freely given, and can only be received freely. You cannot earn it or buy it.

Human love may sometimes be hedged about with conditions, strings attached, but God is not like that. This is what Isaiah and the parable are saying to us. And once you know this for yourself this is what will release the springs of love and generosity in you. When you know you are loved without condition or limitation then you can be free to love in turn.

We do see today an example of how generous people can be in the food banks many of our churches are providing, where those in need can come to receive offerings of food and drink. This is a wonderful practical way of living the Gospel, sharing what we have to help those less fortunate than ourselves. The Gospel reading for [this Sunday](#) is one of the parables where Jesus takes a few fish and loaves and with them is able to feed a large crowd. People sometimes ask, what *really* happened here? One idea is that his example of selfless service inspired those present to share what they had. We need not reduce or limit the miracle in this way, but then maybe it is something of a miracle that human beings, alongside being self-centred, belligerent and dismissive of others, can be generous in sharing what they have - and can be so because they know that God is sharing himself with them. This is the one great miracle that our faith suggests to us.

There is probably something in each one of us of the elder brother, just as there is something of the prodigal. We all have a journey of discovery to make, more and more of the free gift of God's love to us and to all people. Henri Nouwen in his well known book, *The Return of the Prodigal*, sees both brothers in himself, but also comes to see that he must go beyond the nature of both brothers to become the Father - and this the vocation of all God's people: to know him in ourselves so that we can become him for others. The early Church put it like this:

God became human so that human beings may become God.

To which I say, Wow, can that really be? Yes, it is, is what our faith tell us.

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