

Dear Friends,

At the end of readings from Scripture in our liturgy we are accustomed to hearing, 'This is the Word of the Lord.' The current English version of the Mass changed this wording to simply, 'The Word of the Lord,' a change which I quite like, as it makes the reading an offering, parallel to 'The Body of Christ' when receiving holy communion, while 'This is ...' is an announcement.

I recall some years ago a reader saying to me that she was going to find it difficult to say 'This is the Word of the Lord' after a particularly bloodthirsty passage from the Old Testament, because, as she said, she did not think it was the Word of the Lord; she found it hard to believe that God could order execution for a trivial offence. I tried to tell her that when we say those words during an act of worship of the Church we are not giving a personal opinion. We are saying that this passage is part of the whole canon of Scripture accepted by the churches throughout the ages as the authentic Word of God. Our Scriptures were written over a long period of time, many centuries in fact, and show development in the way God is understood and presented to us, from a more primitive to a more mature view. The Scriptures are the result of an interplay between God and the human writers, who come from a particular time and place with its history and culture and level of understanding. Nevertheless, it is the same God who is at work throughout, and as Christians we read the Scriptures above all in the light of what Christ tells us of God.

But then Christ himself has some difficult things to say, the so-called "hard sayings," such as the passage chosen for the Gospel reading on this Sunday, where he says that if your hand causes you to sin cut it off, or if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out. My reaction is to think that nobody in their right mind would ever do this, and so Jesus cannot mean it in a literal way. He is not really telling us what we should do! How can we understand sayings like these?

We could perhaps say that Jesus is wanting to emphasise the importance and urgency of his message. Our human life is short, eternity is forever. While we have the chance here and now we need to use the opportunities available to us to center ourselves on God and his kingdom above all things – nothing else can be as vital to us as that: 'seek ye *first* the kingdom of God.'

People sometimes say, live each day as if it were your last. But how can we do that?

There is a story told about St. Francis of Assisi. He was gardening one day when friends came to him and said, 'If you were to discover that this is going to be your last day on earth, what would you do?' They expected him to say something very deeply religious, but after he had thought for a moment he replied, 'I would carry on gardening! – *but* I would give myself completely to this activity, putting the whole of myself into what I am doing in this moment.' Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, that is where God is. If we can be in the moment wholeheartedly, not looking forward or backward in our thoughts, then we shall be with God – and being with God as much as we can now would be the best preparation for our future life with God in the afterworld.

There are more hard sayings in the readings for this Sunday, from the letter of St. James. He seems to be suggesting that anyone who is rich and wealthy is in for a difficult time, almost as if being rich disqualifies you from knowing God. I imagine it is often true, as the writer says, that people gain wealth by underhand means, cheating and robbing others, and we remember the words of Jesus about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. This, however, may not quite mean what it seems to. Some say that the eye of the needle was a nickname given to one of the gateways through the city walls of Jerusalem, a narrow opening, but one through which you could just about get a camel if you unloaded its baggage – difficult but not impossible!

On a recent visit to Walsingham I was impressed by one of the pilgrims who came with just a single backpack, into which she had stowed everything she would need for the week. Some people do have a facility for travelling light, whereas some of us have to take several caseloads. I am sure it is good to sit lightly to the baggage and possessions that we accumulate on our journey through life. There is nothing wrong with having a lot of possessions or being very rich, and we do after all need to have some possessions in order to live. The question is, what are you doing with your possessions and what sort of attitude do you have towards them?

One of our surest spiritual guides, St. Ignatius of Loyola, says that everything in this world is given to us as a means by which we can grow in love of God; and that we should value things according to whether they do help us to know God or not. For example, I could use my riches for selfish ends, just to please myself, or I could use them for the benefit of others. In doing that I would be living as God desires me to, and so would come to know him more. It is

all a matter of attitudes and motivation, for God looks not so much at the surface of things but at the inner heart:

*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you, alleluia!*

Wishing you every blessing,

Fr. Robin.