

Dear Friends,

It is nearly ten years since the Church introduced a new revised English version of the Mass, to replace the one that had been in use since the 1970s and had become familiar to us. There were some good reasons for making this change, but many people have been unhappy with the results and especially the quality of the English. Our worship is not constrained by the words we use, and any text that we use for worship is likely to be imperfect in some way or other, but maybe some are more imperfect than others!

One feature that has concerned me particularly, and which I have thought about a lot, is the constant use in the current English Mass of words like 'earning' or 'deserving' in relation to God's 'rewards.' It seems to be even more prominent than it used to be, and is, I believe, seriously misleading. It suggests that if you behave well, then God will reward you. If you lead a good life in this world, you can earn the prize of eternal life in the world to come. This is certainly the way things work in this world. We are brought up from an early stage to think that if we work hard and do everything rightly, we will please our parents, teachers, employers and can expect them to reward us. There is nothing wrong with this thinking in worldly terms, but there is much in Scripture to suggest that this is not at all the way God works.

Think for instance of the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. He is the one who has stayed at home, worked hard, done everything his father has asked him to do - all of which is, of course, very good and praiseworthy. His younger brother, on the other hand, has taken everything his father could give him, squandered it on useless things, reached rock bottom and realised that there was nothing for it but to go back home, tail between his legs. (As they say, home is the place where they have to take you back whether they want to or not!).

You can imagine him on the journey rehearsing what he will say to his father when he reaches home: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' It is well meant, but the father is not the least bit interested in this apology: he is so overjoyed that his son has returned all he wants to do is celebrate. The elder brother, however, is so locked into thoughts of how good he has been, that he cannot bear to join in the festivities. He too has a journey to undertake, a journey of self-realisation. The mistake he makes is in thinking that it is *by* behaving well, obeying his father, doing everything correctly, that he has *earned* his father's love and respect, and really deserves them too. It is the reward for his good behaviour. But you cannot earn the father's love - *and* there is no need to do so, it is a free gift freely given and can only be freely received. As the father says, 'All I have is yours' - 'you are not missing anything because I choose to be generous to the other, everything I can give is available to you.'

Alongside this parable we can take another, one of my favourites, the Labourers in the Vineyard. During the course of a day a landowner takes on men to work in his vineyard, some all day long, some for just one hour. At the end of the day, when it comes to payment, he pays those who have worked all day what they had agreed upon, and the same to those who worked for only one hour. The former are naturally disgruntled and complain: this is not fair! And it isn't fair if you think in human terms: you could certainly not run a business on these lines. These parables,

however, although they use illustrations drawn from this world in which we live, are not about that world - they are about the kingdom of God and how God is. And what this parable shows us is that God is superhumanly generous in giving of himself: he wants everyone to share in his giving of himself, regardless of their merits or deserts. Once you start thinking you have earned God's love, you make it impossible for yourself to receive it, because you are thinking in your human way, and God's ways are not our ways, his thoughts not our thoughts.

The landowner reminds the men who worked all day that he is not being unfair to them, because he pays what they had agreed upon. If he chooses to be generous to others, they have nothing to complain about, and he does choose to be generous - because that is his nature. But again this is not how human beings think, it is not the way of the world.

When we read, then, in the letter of St. James (from which the second reading at Mass is taken on these Sundays) that faith and good works need to go together, we have to be careful how we understand what this means. It is not that by doing good to others we can earn God's regard, but rather that once we do have faith in God, true faith in the true God, we cannot but show that by the way we live. The quality of our faith is seen in how we live. We will know that it is God's nature to give of himself unstintingly to everyone, without setting limitations or conditions ('I will love you if ... !), and so if we believe in him, we see that we must be the same, giving of ourselves to everyone. As human beings, of course, we will fall short in this respect, but at least we can recognise that this is how we should be; and remember - God loves you not because you are good, but because he is good!

The Gospel reading on this Sunday ends with well-known words of Our Lord:

*Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it;
but anyone who loses his life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*

Losing your life and saving it might mean various things, but one meaning certainly is that we give ourselves away, as God gives himself away. It is the nature of God to be self-giving above all things, and we will be most Godlike, which means most ourselves seeing that we are made in the image of God, when we likewise are self-giving. This is the secret of happiness or fulfilment in our human life: the more we give of ourselves, the more truly human we become, because the more like God we will be. I sometimes say to couples getting married, 'In your marriage do not so much aim to be happy yourself, but aim at making your wife or husband happy - and then you will end up being happy yourself.' I think that is how it works!

We are made by God in love and called by God to live in love. This is the deepest truth about every human person born in this world, but to know it entails letting go of our ordinary human ways of thinking in order to share in the mind of God.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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