

Fr Paul's Homily - 11th October 2009

28th Sunday in the Year of Mark

I am immensely grateful for the past week at Douai Abbey where I have been on retreat with the Bishop and a good number of the diocesan clergy. It was an opportunity to stand back and renew those beliefs and hopes that are so vital in the journey of life and faith.

Something that hit me forcibly was the vital truth, which I already knew but which in the business of life has slipped to near the bottom of the pile, that every human heart, every human life has a place for God and is created for him. The spirit of God is at work in every person inviting them to have faith and trust in God and to find meaning outside themselves. Every human being is on a pilgrimage which is about going to God, finding fulfilment in him and searching for him.

Rather like the man in the Gospel today. Somehow he had been touched by Jesus and his message. He was sincere and enthusiastic running to Jesus and kneeling before him. He had high expectations for himself and tremendous respect. He was not like the Pharisees of last Sunday's Gospel who were testing Jesus and trying to catch him out. He was touched by the hope that Jesus had something special to give. That perhaps Jesus could give him wisdom leading to joy, the message of life and the way to eternal life.

"Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Characteristically Jesus did not accept the term "good" for himself. We know that he always referred everything to his Father which he received as a gift. Perhaps it was the man's sincerity that elicited that look of love from Jesus after the man had said that he had kept all the commandments. But the response of Jesus would come as a cold shock for the man. The man would have been brought up with the belief that great wealth was a gift from God and a sign of his favour. Surely Jesus must have got it wrong? But going against the belief of the time Jesus says: "Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor and then follow me. We are told that the man face fell and he went away sad because he was a man of great wealth.

We do not know what happened to the man. We do know that discipleship which required following Jesus, was impossible for him at that point in his life. Impossible, because as Jesus says, it easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus has already ruled out divorce for his disciples and now he rules out wealth and possessions, which for the man and his audience was a sign of

God's favour. They were amazed and astounded because Jesus was systematically overturning the religious law which was so important for them. No wonder they say "Who then can be saved?"

Winchester now rejoices in a new Temple, it is called Waitrose. As I drove back from a prayer group in Weeke last Saturday afternoon people were flocking in and out and shopping bags and car boots were groaning. Yet we know that Waitrose is not a Temple because human beings are not made happy by what they buy or what they own. We know that wealth and possessions do not bring happiness never mind eternal life. So why the surprise when Jesus agrees that being saved is impossible?

It is impossible because the man asks the wrong question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The impossibility grows out of Jesus' words last Sunday "Anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

There is the answer and that is the point. The Kingdom of God, eternal life, peace and well being, justice and truth, all components of eternal life are gift and can only be received as such. That is why the example of the little child is so important. The little child comes with no wealth, no possessions, no status and no purchasing or anyother kind of power. All he can do is welcome the gift with gratitude.

The message goes deeper and gets more challenging. Those who were most open to Jesus and the Kingdom those, who unlike the man in the Gospel, did not go away sad, were the ones who had nothing. The riches, the power and the status of privilege were not for them obstacles to receiving the gift. They did not exist in the life of the poor ones who flocked to Jesus and so there was no temptation to think that it was possible to be saved by our own efforts, that in fact God did not matter and was not significant in the quest for life.

Good Catholics would respond that, of course, we cannot be saved by our own efforts. Yet let's not forget the Lord's word to Eve: "Eat the apple and you will become like God knowing good and evil." The reality is that the more we have, the more our success and power is evident, the more the temptation to think that we can in fact behave like God, or replace him with false Gods, becomes more acceptable and makes sense.

Even in a time of economic difficulty we live in a land of opportunity and plenty. How do we avoid being like the man in the Gospel who because of his wealth turned away from the Lord and refused an invitation to follow?

For the man the wealth was an obstacle but that need not be true for us. Possessions are gifts from God and we must always give thanks for them. The

prayer of thanksgiving will widen our vision and help us to see more and more clearly that no amount of wealth will bring us the fullness of life. Wealth can only distract us and tempt us away from the one vital thing which is a readiness to leave everything and follow Christ. Leaving everything means a radical and wholehearted readiness to depend on Christ in our journey through life and to believe that the things that really matter like life, joy, love and peace come from the hand of God to those courageous enough to receive them.