

Homily for the 21st Sunday of Year C, 25th August 2019

God calls all people to be saved and all people are free to respond.

As I tried to wrench Sarah's wheelchair from wet sand on a beach at Scarborough yesterday, I felt a strain on a muscle in my lower back. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Sarah had wanted to put her feet in the sea and we're an inclusive parish so if everybody else was paddling why shouldn't Sarah, at least after a fashion? She managed to dangle her feet in the water, the sun was shining and all was going, well, swimmingly. And then as the wheelchair sank we realised it looked like we would have to leave her there. Fortunately a band of sturdy sea-kayakers came to our aid and four of them carried her to safety.

As I hobbled around a bit yesterday evening, the phrase from the Letter to the Hebrews that we heard in our second reading struck me, for understandable reasons: "the injured limb will not be wrenched, it will grow strong again." Our bodies tell us about our faith. In time, often, healing comes and we experience God's goodness. Or if, like Sarah, we have to bear the cross of a permanent disability, God helps us to bear it. Or if we discover that we are terminally ill – and it is my privilege to accompany many people in this situation – God gives us consolation through the action of his Holy Spirit, fortifying us, giving us hope for the future. The key thing is that, whatever our state of health, God does not just leave us to our own devices. The Holy Spirit is always active, building us up, conferring untold blessing upon us, encouraging us at a deep level.

These bodies are ours for eternity. On the last day, we confidently hope, they will be glorified and reunited to our immortal souls. We do not know exactly what heaven will be like – our tradition teaches us that it exceeds our every desire – but an intimation of what awaits us is given by the sheer pleasure of having the sun shine upon our faces on a beautiful summer's day

And what do we have to do so that we may inherit eternal life? That's the question that Jesus was asked at the beginning of our gospel today and it's an important one for all of us. We simply have to respond to God's gracious invitation to us to enter into communion with him. In this way God respects our personal freedom, which is his precious gift to us. Only

through exercising our freedom can we say “yes” to God and be saved by God.

God, we know wants all people to be saved. In our first reading Isaiah presented us with a vision for the future when all the peoples of the world would gather in Jerusalem, bringing their gifts as an offering to the Lord the God of Israel. It’s a wondrous image which finds its fulfilment in the new Jerusalem, the Church established by Christ, where all people have their proper place. Jesus picks up on this image when he refers in today’s gospel to people coming from “east and west, north and south” to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Jesus’ Church is always outward-looking, her doors are always open, she is always spending herself in reaching out to people who as yet have not experienced the powerful mercy of God our Father.

And the rest is up to each individual. In one of the Communion services I led this week we were rather struck by the starkness of Jesus’ message in today’s gospel. How can we reconcile the fact that God is all-loving with this image of people standing outside and knocking on the door and the master of the house saying: “I do not know where you come from. Away from me all you wicked men!”

As I reflected on our conversation afterwards I noticed that it is the master of the house, not God, who says these words in the story. Hence we can’t simply attribute what he says to God. At the same time, the message underlying the story seems clear: Jesus is telling us that we need to respond to God’s invitation right now. The Christian life is characterised by urgency. Jesus is speaking to each of us today and inviting us to consider seriously the quality of our response to the prompting of his Holy Spirit. Are we doing that which we might to live the new life of being his disciple? I for one am not. The image of the narrow door suggests that this new life is challenging. We have to be intentional about going through such a door. We cannot just wander through it as we might a wider opening. This suggests that authentic Christian faith invariably involves not just love at the level of generally wishing everybody well but self-sacrificial love which is manifested in repeated concrete acts.

For, and this is the key, we have all been baptised and the Holy Spirit is living in each one of us, prompting us to be more truly human. We will

only experience peace of mind when we surrender to the Spirit and allow him to revivify us, strengthen us and give direction to our lives. What good is sunshine if it is not the harbinger of the coming into our lives of the Sun who never sets, Jesus our crucified and risen Lord?

When Sarah set out yesterday to have the experience of the sea washing over her feet, I think that she was responding to a deep need that all of us feel: the need to be refreshed, cleansed, touched by the elements, to be connected to this great and beautiful world which is an expression of God's love for us his people. For those, like Sarah, who are baptised, water always has a peculiar resonance, reminding us in some way that is difficult to articulate of the Sacrament through which we received God's eternal life. Looking back on this simple, half-comic moment it seems to me that Sarah was helping me to see where my hope lies – in Jesus, and in him alone. And when the sea-kayakers intervened, God was at work in them, showing us that we must be “doing,” that our faith must manifest itself in kindness.

So even though I was a little unsettled by the gospel when I read it earlier in the week I now conclude very confidently: There is no need to fear. God is on our side. He sent his Son to die on the cross to save us. He wishes to draw us into the feast in the kingdom, the feast that we anticipate as we celebrate the Eucharist at this altar. And in today's readings he does not threaten us; rather he shows his respect for us. God is telling us: I will not force my gladness upon you. I leave it to you freely to receive it. Participate in my holy Church and you will already experience here and now the joy of salvation, nor will I ever withdraw this joy from you.