

The 13th Sunday of Year A: Doing ‘good turns’ to God’s followers.

1st Reading: 2 Kings 4:8-11+14-16: A child is promised to a kindly woman;

2nd Reading: Romans 6:3-4+8-11: By Baptism, we share Jesus’ death & life;

Gospel: Matthew 10:37-42: Serious choices: follow Jesus + help his people.

Recently, we had the 7th anniversary of the referendum to leave the EU. I am not commenting on the wisdom of the result (I have my own views), but simply on the fact that the choice was to remain in, or to leave, an international ‘club’. Many in my last parish belonged to one of the various golf clubs in the area, so I suppose people saw the EU similarly: a club to which one either wanted or did not want to belong. People often saw the RC Church in terms of a ‘club’: you kept the rules, paid your dues and got the benefits. In this case, Baptism was the ‘membership card’; the commandments, the ‘rules’; the Sunday collections, the ‘club fees’; and the sacraments – with the promise of eternal life, the benefits. I hope I don’t shock modern purists with this old, worldly view of the Church!

The problem? Seeing the Church this way is too ‘transactional’. By that, I mean it is almost financial – like the mortgage agreement for a house, or a lease for a car, or even a working agreement between companies. What is missing is any idea of a personal relationship – between us and God, or between ourselves as members of the Church. In the 2nd reading, St Paul sees Baptism, not as a ‘membership card’, but as a sharing in Jesus’ death followed by a sharing in his risen life. The result: *“You must consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive for God in Christ Jesus.”* That involves far more than being a member of a club: it means a totally different way of life. I think people who are adult converts do get this sense of a ‘fresh start’; I envy them. It does not stop them being human, with human weaknesses, but it offers them a different view of life, with the sense that a loving Christ is with them, to forgive and help them.

Jesus uses the same idea of commitment in the gospel, but in terms that may sound strange to us. Sometimes, he says, we must choose between family members and loyalty to him. He then adds: *“Anyone who not take up his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me.”* Perhaps he is anticipating his own execution a couple of years later, but he is more probably referring to a common (but to us, ghastly) sight in Galilee: public crucifixion of criminals. The Romans were not just the cuddly road-builders we see in BBC4 TV shows. They enforced their laws with brutality, condemning many to death, and making them carry a cross to specified road-side execution spot, where the victim would be tied on the cross till he died of exposure - or of exhaustion from trying to breathe. Jesus is simply saying that sometimes, we must ask ourselves: is my faith in him so strong, so that I can face death for what my conscience tells me is true?

On a happier note, the first reading and most of the gospel are about hospitality. In 2 Kings chapter 4, in a story fairly unknown - at least, to me - the

prophet Elisha (Elijah's successor) was given food on his regular journeys by "a woman of rank", with her husband's agreement. What is more, the couple agreed to build a room for the prophet's use. In return, Elisha promised the lady (who had no children so far) that she would have a son by the next year. This hospitality is reflected in St Paul's advice to his young colleague Titus in Titus 1:8: "*(The bishop) must be a man who is hospitable, and a friend of all that is good.*" In a similar vein, St Peter writes in 1 Peter 4:9: "*Welcome each other into your houses without grumbling.*" This idea of hospitality was basic to both parts of the Bible.

In the gospel, Jesus takes the idea a stage further, in the sense that those who welcome his messengers / disciples / apostles are, in effect, receiving him: "*Anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me; those who welcome me welcome the one who sent me.*" This was a very Jewish idea: when we welcome the representative of a senior person, it is as if we were welcoming that person into our homes. This explains why the ambassador of a foreign country is given such a great and formal welcome by the head of state – he or she stands for the country they represent, so any respect - or dishonour – paid to the ambassador reflects our respect – or contempt – for his or her country.

How far should we take this? I do not wish to enter into the controversy about the arrival of thousands of asylum-seekers / economic migrants in the UK. There must be a distinction between the two groups, but I do not know enough to be able to speak on the issue – especially living in this very rural area. I suspect that many readers will be more concerned by how we see hospitality in our local parishes & neighbourhoods. As a young teaching priest, I had two influences that affected my outlook. The first was living (with other priests) in a big house that was part of the school where we taught. There were often visitors moving around the ground floor, so 'invasion of privacy' was rarely felt to be an issue. A second influence was my connection with a certain 'big house' and parishes in the Western Highlands. (The school had long-standing links with the Diocese of Argyll & the Isles.) There, it was natural to welcome people into others' homes; this also applied to presbyteries. In the Highlands, I never met the problem I have seen here: a presbytery like a fortress, where the priest (or housekeeper) kept people at the door, as if they were pirates trying to board a ship!

Of course, we are all different. However, Jesus' words in this gospel are strong: if we 'serve' (in whatever way) his people, we serve him. We cannot all be apostles, etc, but we are all 'his people'. The imperative is to help each other.
Fr Jim Dunne.