

Homily: 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

It's less than four months to Christmas! I only mention that because I was thinking, in the light of today's readings, of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' wonderful short story *A Christmas Carol*. Most of us know it well, I imagine. It's a very well-loved story, not least because we rejoice in the transformation – we could say redemption – of its main character. Scrooge goes from being a miserly, mean and hateful man to a man filled with love, joy and a generous heart. It's a story of hope: change is possible.

But, like so many things that we encounter in the Christmas season, this story and its message quickly fade into the background when January comes. The idea that human beings can really change seems less real in ordinary time, especially if we find that our New Year's resolutions quickly fail. But we want to believe that real transformation is possible. And real transformation means a change of heart, not simply living in a different way on the outside. Someone who learned to smile at his enemy but still hated him would not have changed: he would simply have learned to mask his hatred.

External changes of habit can be relatively easy, but real, internal change is hard. To be genuine, it must be at the level of the heart, and our hearts cling on to all that they feel and desire, good or bad. But, as Jesus teaches today, it is from our hearts that our intentions emerge, and very often these intentions are not filled with love. We see all too often the effect of human hatred: we may witness it in the lives of our loved ones, our communities, or on the world stage. The terrible situation in Afghanistan is a result of hatred, fear, malice and violence welling up in human hearts. In fact, every act of violence, every war, has ultimately begun in human hearts filled with loathing for others. Ultimately, then, the only way to change the world is to change human hearts. Nothing else can effect lasting transformation.

That's one reason why Jesus is so critical of the scribes and pharisees. On the outside, they look like they are living good lives, but the truth is that their hearts are filled with anything but love. And their hatred will result in violence: these are the men who will have Jesus put on the cross. They say lots of prayers, of course, but Jesus quotes a passage of the prophet Isaiah which says, "the worship they offer me is worthless" – it has no value, because it does not come from the heart. This is important for us: we are here to pray, to encounter God, but it must not be merely outward observance. If we say words but don't consider their meaning, if we genuflect or kneel down without thinking why, if we receive Holy Communion but without a sense of love for Jesus, the One we receive, then our prayer is not from the heart. Jesus invites us to speak to Him, heart to heart, really opening ourselves up to Him and asking Him to enter our hearts, to change them, to fill them with His love.

In today's second reading St James tells us to accept and submit the word which has been planted in us: he is speaking of God's law of love, God's living Word, which has been sown in our hearts, to take root and bear fruit there. We may think of God's Word as being in the Bible on our bookshelves, but it is not an external thing: it is planted in us. Unless the words of Scripture come off the page and find a home in us, they cannot bear fruit. James teaches

today that, "It is all that is good, everything that is perfect, which is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light". Given from above, but taking root in us. Evil intentions, as Jesus teaches, often emerge from human hearts; but if we receive all that comes from the Father of light and allow that goodness to live and grow in us, then good intentions will come from within.

This has already happened on a cosmic scale. Jesus came down from the Father of all light to live on earth as one of us. He came into a world full of sin, marred by hatred and oppression, suffering under the weight of human wrongdoing. It was hardly a fitting home for the Son of God, but He came and lived here all the same. And He faced that sin head on, suffered its consequences, and overcame that evil, so as to live a new life, the life of resurrection, even while still in our world. He wants to do exactly the same thing for us: to come and settle in our hearts and bring His saving power. Your heart or my heart may not be much of a home for Him, but He comes anyway. He comes to face everything in us that is not loving: every resentment we harbour, every jealousy we feel, every fear that grips us, every wrong or harmful desire we experience; He comes to defeat those things and bring us a new life, a risen life, a life of love, beginning in our hearts. This is what our Christian lives are all about. We struggle to change our hearts, but we do not need to struggle alone. Invite the Lord in: allow Him to make His home in you. Accept and submit to His Word, His message of love; let it be truly planted and bear fruit in your life.

Fr Andrew

