

## Homily: 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

Have you ever imagined what your life would be like if you were completely perfect? If you never did anything wrong, but always did what is right and were always motivated by perfect love? Everyone would love you, wouldn't they? Surely you would be the most popular and beloved person on the planet! Except that, when we start to think about it, we can see where things might get tricky. Your colleague at work has messed something up they ask you to tell a little white lie to help them sort it out. You can't do it, of course. Or your best friend asks you to put in a good word with someone you know to give them an advantage in a job interview, and you have to tell them you can't. Or you refuse to join in an unkind conversation about someone, and everyone thinks you're being aloof. Then, of course, there's the problem that, if you are to truly love others, sometimes it means telling them difficult things. You can't ignore wrongdoing – love demands that you point out when someone is doing evil. You can make plenty of enemies by doing that!

If you have ever thought about these things, you're not the first to do so. Around 375BC the great philosopher Plato made his own enquiry, asking what would happen if a man lived a life which didn't merely just *seem* good and just, but truly was perfectly good. His conclusion is rather extraordinary. This is what he writes: "the just man, as we have pictured him, will be scourged, tortured, and imprisoned; his eyes will be put out, and after enduring every humiliation he will be crucified." (*The Republic* II, 361e-362a). It is almost a perfect description of what did indeed happen, some four centuries later, to the man who did live a perfect life on earth: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. What Plato had worked out for himself, Scripture also predicted. In the Book of Wisdom, as we hear in today's first reading, the godless are annoyed by the virtuous man, so much so that they decide to "condemn him to a shameful death." They mock the virtuous man for believing that he is God's son, and that God will save him in his need. But the truly virtuous man is Jesus. He is indeed God's Son, and God truly did save Him out of death, raising Him to new life on Easter morning.

In today's Gospel Jesus predicts all this. The disciples can't take in what is saying, but don't ask Him to clarify it, because they are frightened. They would rather not know. And later in the Gospel, they are silent again. Jesus asks them what they were discussing on the road. They are afraid to tell Him, because they have been talking about which of them was the greatest. They are very slow to learn! In fact, they are so slow to learn that we have today almost exactly the same sequence of events we heard of in last week's Gospel. As with last week, Jesus and the disciples are on a journey. As they go, He teaches them, predicting for them His suffering, death and resurrection. Last week Peter heard this with horror and tried to persuade the Lord to change His mind; this week, there is an equally poor response: they more or less sidestep what Jesus is saying and decide to discuss which of them is the greatest. And these poor responses lead to Jesus teaching more deeply what it means to be His disciple. You may recall that last week, He spoke about taking up our cross, and losing our life in order to save it. This week He teaches that, to truly be His disciple, we must make ourselves last of all and servant of all.

Jesus then illustrates this by calling a child to Him and telling the disciples that they must welcome children in His name. It might sound to us like this is a different teaching, as though He's now moving on to a new subject; but there is continuity here, because in Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke) and in Greek (the language of the Gospels) the word for "child" can also mean "servant". That might surprise us, but it shows how differently children were viewed in the ancient world. In fact, children were far less valued by society than they are today. We rightly pay attention to every child, to his or her needs, and recognise the individual dignity and value of children. But in the culture of our Lord's time, children were actually viewed as "non-persons" – they had no legal rights or status of their own. So when Jesus says "Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me", it's really radical, probably even shocking to His disciples. He is identifying Himself with those who are most small and vulnerable, and teaching something about the value of those whom society doesn't respect.

We might ask ourselves, "Who is the 'non-person' in society today?" Those who are homeless often lack the status and opportunities of those who have a roof over their heads, and asylum seekers may not be afforded the same legal rights as citizens. To welcome them in Jesus' name is to welcome Him. And tragically, we must also include those who are not yet born, whose rights and status are often not recognised by law. The Church rightly speaks out for the dignity and worth of every life, from conception to natural end. There is no such thing as a "non-person" in the eyes of God. The tiniest and most fragile life always has infinite value.

Jesus identifies with these "non-persons" of our world. He teaches us to welcome them as we would Him. And more than that, He becomes one of them. Once, He was an unborn child; as an infant, He was a refugee, seeking asylum in Egypt to avoid the murderous intentions of Herod. At times He lived as one who is homeless, finding no room at the inn, and having nowhere to lay His head. And on the cross, He died as a condemned criminal, judged by society as not even being worthy of life. A "non-person". A truly virtuous man, condemned by the godless. Today we thank Him for giving so much, for making Himself last of all and servant of all for our salvation; and we pray that we may be given the grace to welcome those who are vulnerable, those who are rejected, and those whom no-one else values, recognising in them the face and the presence of Jesus.

Fr Andrew

