

Homily for The Twenty Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) (27/09.20)

St Paul is not always an easy person to please. His letters are often responses to questions or complaints, and so they frequently focus on things that have gone wrong, things that displease him. People have misunderstood the Gospel, and he has to put them right. So it brings us up short when, today, we hear him talking about the one thing that would make him 'completely happy'. Here is a man who is not easily pleased, a spiritual giant who expects great things of himself and of others, and he is telling us the one thing, the only thing, that is going to make him happy. It must be pretty special. So what is it? We are so familiar with the scripture passages that we hear, I am not sure that if I was cruel enough to ask you, you would have picked it up. If I am honest, I am not sure that I would have myself if I wasn't looking out for it. But it must be something incredibly important.

The 'one thing' that will make St Paul 'completely happy' is for the Philippians to be:

United in their convictions;
United in their love;
With a common purpose; and
A common mind.

It sounds like four things, but they all flow from the same place. There will be no competition, no conceit, no thinking myself better than other people, and from this decision not to put myself first will come unity of purpose, the strength that flows from all people working together to achieve a shared goal. This does not happen automatically, or without effort. Just saying 'Lets all have a common mind' is not enough; we need to make decisions that will make this happen. The first reading is about the significance of our decisions: our choices matter. The Gospel reinforces this: airy good intentions are not enough, it is the decisions that we make and our will to put them into practice that will deliver. The parable Jesus tells is meant to shock us into realizing how easily we promise to do things, but then how easily we let those promises slip. The will to form the words with our mouths is not enough; there must also be a strong determination to do the deeds.

St Paul doesn't just leave it with a comment about what will make him happy, he goes on to explain what this means in practice when he puts before us this beautiful hymn to humility. Christ emptied himself so as to come and join us, he didn't cling to his power and his majesty and his safety. St Paul tells us that we need a determined will to seek and pursue a common goal, and to achieve this we need to understand the contrast between emptying and clinging. The emptying Christ does, abandoning his safety and majesty to live with us, bears rich fruits; but clinging is destructive and fruitless. Emptying is fruitful, clinging is destructive. Choices matter. Decisions are important, but are only when combined with a positive will, a decisive intention, to act.

In his General Audience of September 2nd, Pope Francis turned to what the world might look like after the pandemic has passed. He tells us that no-one emerges from a crisis unchanged. We will be better or we will be worse, but we cannot carry on as if nothing has happened. The choice lies with us, and future generations will judge our generation on the basis of what we choose. We have realized in the present crisis that we depend on one another. None of the actions taken to defeat the virus can work alone, they require us all to accept that we depend on one another: choices we make affect each other, and the survival of the weakest depends on the actions of the strongest. This is decisively the time for emptying, not for clinging.

Pope Francis tells us that solidarity, a recognition that we depend on one another, must be the way forward. We could go even further, and say that we don't need just to accept this, we need to embrace it with joy. Just saying 'Yes, that's a good idea' is still not enough. There is a danger that we end up like the second son in the parable, who spoke fine words but without the power of will to put them into practice. Let me share with you part of a beautiful prayer I read recently:

'Inject the blessed energy of your Yes into my heart, for only then will it issue from my lips in praise and from my hands in deeds, now as only one Yes, *our Yes*, intending only the glory of our Father and the salvation of our world.'
Erasmio Leiva Merikakis, Fire of Mercy, Heart of the World, commentary on Mt 21.31

When the history of the Twenty First Century comes to be written, might it be that people say the time of COVID was the beginning of a new and more generous world order, one that is modeled more on emptying and less on clinging, one that sees the human family with a common mind and a common purpose? It sounds a lot to ask, but Pope Francis is right: if we don't determine to make the world better, it will not happen by itself; it will get worse.