

Homily for The Twenty Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)(18/10/20)

*'O sing a new song to the Lord,
sing to the Lord all the earth'.*

It is quite hard to listen to these words without a wry smile. We are not able to sing any songs at all to the Lord, new or otherwise, at the moment. Even the word 'new' has begun to take on a negative tone: new restrictions, new cases, new statistics, new job losses, new shop closures. So it seems a bit of a strange time for the psalmist to be inviting us to sing a new song. But the song that the psalmist is talking about is something very specific: *'Tell among the nations his glory and his wonders among all the people.'* The new song we are asked to sing is a song of hope, hope based on experience.

The word 'new' has become loaded with negativity, because so much of the time new things are leading us into an unknown place. For most of us, new things unsettle us because we do not quite know what they mean, where they will lead, how they will feel. We know that almost every day at the moment new rules are coming into force, but we do not know quite how they will impact our lives, what life will feel like when we live by them, and this disturbs us. We can see very easily what we are going to lose, but we cannot so easily see what we are going to gain. And so we groan.

So, on the one hand we have our ongoing experience of repeated newness, of changes that leave us unsettled and uncertain and longing to be left alone, and on the other hand we have the psalmist singing 'lets have a song that is new'.

But the new song the psalm suggests is a newness that brings stability, not change; hope, not anxiety; relief, not despair. Whenever Jesus is backed into a corner by the religious leaders, wherever they set a trap for him so that it looks as if, whatever he says, they will be able to criticize him and show him up, always he finds a way around it. He is always able to say and do exactly the right thing that preserves his integrity, that leaves the place of stillness, calm and tranquility within him undisturbed. His accusers leave irritated, disturbed and upset because their malice has been shown up. Jesus walks away calmly because he has retained his integrity and his focus on truth and goodness. The psalmist is saying to us, find those things within you that are the core of who you are, the things that must never be compromised, the things without which you would not be you; cling onto them and sing them loud because they are worth celebrating. He is inviting us to do what Jeremiah says in one of my favourite scripture verses:

'Halt at the cross-roads, look well, and ask yourselves which path it was that stood you in good stead long ago. That path follow, and you will find rest for your souls.'
(Jeremiah 6.16)

Oh yes please, lets have some rest for our souls. The new song that the psalm today asks us to sing comes from deep within our hearts. It comes from our

prayerful reflection on the good things that God has given us, on the gentleness that he has shown to us, on the joy that he has shared with us. It stems from the extraordinary truth that he has loved us, does love us and will love us for eternity, and so all is well.

So let us set aside some time to reflect this week on the times when life has seemed just so very good; when it has seemed that everything is just so right; when all the things that are best and most admirable and most desirable about me were shining brightly, and the darker things, the plotting and the self-promotion and the grasping after power and influence that we see in the gospel were controlled in me. As we look at the next phase of this difficult time, the only way that I will come through it well is if the best of me goes into it, not the worst of me. The worst version of me will cause disruption, anxiety, despair even, just as the Pharisees set out to do in the Gospel, and will then collapse under the weight of it all. The best version of me has a chance of being a source of hope, and stability. The best version of me has a chance of imagining, and working towards, a new future that is brighter, a future that is more focused on all the things that are admirable and life-giving and which has turned away from all the things that sap our joy, our freedom, our energy. Whatever is going on outside of me, much of which is beyond my control, I want to attack it with all the things that are best about me at the forefront; with all the parts of me that are so precious that I must never let them go fully engaged, not hidden away for safekeeping. What were the paths that stood us in good stead in the past, that helped us through difficult times before? Follow those paths. The only way to come through these coming months well is if it is the best version of me, not the worst, that goes into them.