

Sunday Homily

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

3 JULY 2022

YEAR C

“He said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’”

Luke 10:2

Illustration

As runners crowd excitedly towards the start of the London marathon, there’s an atmosphere of celebration – the perspiration comes later! Yet it’s also a culmination of many months of training. Such training is costly: the recommended four runs a week (three forty-minute jogs and a longer one at the weekend) will have their impact on a runner’s diet, social life and other interests, as well as their comfort. After all, who wants to step out on a wet, cold evening? As race day approaches, it increasingly influences the runner’s daily life. Yet for the dedicated, the marathon is worth the sacrifice.

Fr Pedro Arrupe, SJ, observed that “What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.” Whatever our passion, from sporting activity to another person, an ideal or a cherished ambition, it claims our full attention, putting other things into perspective. And it needs to: if we are too easily distracted away from our goal, we may lose out on what is really important. Marathon runners cannot afford to train casually if they want to stay the course on the day.

Gospel Teaching

When it comes to what matters, what could be more vital than spreading the good news of God’s kingdom? As Jesus sends out the seventy, their mission is as urgent as it is important. He is now well on his way to Jerusalem and the climax of his ministry: sealing God’s ultimate victory over evil through his death and resurrection. Jesus instructs his disciples to devote themselves to their task. They are not to be distracted by lengthy greetings on the road or indulgent socialising at their destination: they are to stay in one house only. They are not to carry possessions, wealth, or even a spare pair of sandals, but merely go as they are. Such simplicity will not only keep the disciples focused, but also remind them of their dependence on God’s provision.

Jesus is fully aware of his disciples’ vulnerability, describing them as lambs going out amongst wolves, but the need to rely on divine rather than human resources is vital. The disciples are to be engaged in urgent kingdom work, proclaiming God’s salvation for all. The message of the prince of peace, who offers reconciliation at

every level, will be life-giving for those who respond, whilst those who choose to turn their backs on the living God will face the deathly consequences. The disciples are to underline any rejection of God's invitation by "shaking the dust off their feet". In Jesus' day, strict Jews returning to Palestine from abroad would rid their footwear of any defiling Gentile mud picked up on their journey. Thus the disciples' action will illustrate that those who spurn God's message are placing themselves outside the company of his people.

The disciples are not just one more group of itinerant preachers: the inauguration of God's kingdom is now imminent, and they are its appointed heralds. As they preach, heal and cast out demons, they will express Christ's victory over the evil one, whom Jesus sees being defeated even as they exercise their ministry. Perhaps the disciples glimpse this glory on their mission, as they return in delighted amazement at their first-hand experience of God's power and authority. But Jesus warns them not to let the excitement go to their heads: however dazzling their temporary spiritual achievements, their eternal citizenship in heaven is the real cause for rejoicing.

Application

Do we get distracted in our discipleship? We often have good intentions as we seek to follow our Saviour. Yet we can so easily find ourselves sidetracked on the way. Our Gospel passage reminds us that the work of God's kingdom is of supreme importance – ultimately a matter of life and death. We need to take time to attend to eternal priorities amidst our everyday pressures.

If we feel daunted by our call to proclaim Christ's love and salvation, we are in good company. The disciples, too, were ordinary, frail folk. Serving Christ will take us out of our comfort zone, where we become all too aware of our human limitations. Yet that can be the very place where we are ready to draw upon God's resources, and discover just what he can do through us when we have the courage to go for him as we are, not as we'd like to be.

Sunday Homily

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

10 JULY 2022

YEAR C

“But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus,
‘And who is my neighbour?’”

Luke 10:29

Illustration

One night British writer and broadcaster Libby Purves got out of her new car beside a busy main road, leaving the engine and lights on. To her horror, the car locked itself. Her keys, mobile phone and coat were inside. Commuters rushed past, paying no heed to her waves for help. One battered vehicle did stop. Inside were two rough-looking young women, members of a minor pop band. She asked to be taken to the nearest phone box, but they, concerned at her waiting alone for some time while her husband drove out with the spare keys, insisted on taking her all the way home. In age, lifestyle and outlook they were poles apart. But in a moment of crisis, they were just three women together.

Stories like that provide light relief to newspapers and newscasts. Schoolchildren comfort an elderly person who has fallen, while another calls an ambulance. A teenager dives into a swollen river to rescue someone older. It warms the heart; there’s still good in the human race. But what strikes us most is the contrast between the person in need and their “good Samaritan”. It brings Jesus’ parable closer to home.

Gospel Teaching

He may have based it on a real event – the road to Jericho was notorious for its bandits. But the characters represented an extreme contrast. Samaritans were religiously and ethnically related to the Jews but accepted only the first five books of the Bible. They had once built a temple on Mount Gerizim to rival that of Jerusalem. Sometimes there was open hostility. About two hundred years before Christ, a Jewish reformer destroyed the Samaritan temple. Sometime between 6 and 4 BC Samaritans scattered bones in the Jerusalem temple, desecrating it. So to orthodox Jews, Samaritans were outsiders, traitors, heretics. They could neither agree to disagree, nor live alongside each other. Most Jews practised a kind of apartheid by taking a long detour to avoid walking on Samaritan soil – a convention Jesus broke.

So the idea of a Samaritan being a good neighbour to a Jew, or a Jew being neighbourly to a Samaritan, horrified the lawyer. He asked, “Who is my neighbour?” because he was looking for a let-out clause which defined “neighbour” as “someone like me”. Instead, he got a spiritual knockout punch.

Jesus laid bare the biblical teaching that all people are neighbours made in God's image. Before God all are equal – equal in dignity, and equal in sin. Colour, class, race and creed are for practical purposes irrelevant. There are no second-class or inferior people, just people, like us. The two great commandments, which the lawyer knew by heart, ruled that wholehearted love for God was to be expressed by selfless and practical love for our neighbour. The two laws were completely inseparable. Break one, and you've broken the other. We are to be like God: he gave himself for us, so we are to give ourselves for others.

Application

We can feel the lawyer's pain. We also like to choose whom we help and whom we ignore. Like the priest and the Levite in the story, we look for excuses not to get involved. Fear of consequences may be one. Being dragged into more than we can cope with is another. Or we may feel sorry but conclude it's someone else's responsibility to help. But the beggar in the street who needs medical attention is my neighbour even if he does make me late and my car dirty. The noisy, rude and disruptive family down the road whose house is damaged by fire or flood leaving them homeless are my neighbours even if I wouldn't invite them to camp out in my house by choice. Of course, when we see pictures of starving children, we reach for our small change; but it would be more neighbourly to change our way of life so that people everywhere had a fairer deal.

This is not comfortable teaching. But it is not impossible either. Jesus never asked us to do the impossible. We need only the will to obey; he'll give us the strength to act and he'll sort out the complications. And who knows? As we love God with heart, soul and strength and our neighbour as ourselves, others may be drawn to God too. We never know what one good turn can achieve when it's done in Jesus' name. So let's serve him by serving others.

Sunday Homily

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

17 JULY 2022

YEAR C

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?
Tell her then to help me.”

Luke 10:40

Illustration

Louisa M. Alcott’s book *Little Women* is essentially a morality tale. But it is told with great liveliness, and it centres around the relationships between four sisters, each of them very different. They do not always get on with each other, but they love and trust each other enough to learn from each other. If they had been more alike in character, the story would have been far less amusing, and there would have been far fewer opportunities for each to grow. Their differences are essential to the plot.

Gospel Teaching

Martha and Mary are clearly very different characters, too, but today’s Gospel reading suggests that the learning is all one-way: Mary is right and Martha is wrong. But probably most of us, particularly, perhaps, the women here today, have a sneaking sense of sympathy for Martha, and a feeling that Jesus is being less than just. After all, somebody has to make preparations for guests, get dinner ready, clean up and so on. We can’t all sit about in a contemplative daze.

This story about Martha and Mary is one that we tend to think we know quite well, only to realise that what we think we know is actually an amalgam of several different stories. We tend to associate Mary with the sinful woman who anointed Jesus with costly perfume, and who had a brother named Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. But Mark tells us the bare facts that a nameless woman anointed Jesus’ head; Luke says she was a sinner and that she anointed his feet, but still gives no name, and John tells us that Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, but says nothing about her sinfulness. It is also John who tells us about Lazarus.

So let us look with more care at the passage set for us today, and see what it actually says, rather than what we think it does.

It says, for one thing, that this all happens in Martha’s house. There is no mention of any male relative. All Luke’s first readers would have known instantly that this was an example of Jesus’ famed radical stance towards women. He is doing something very daring by being in that house at all, when they are not his family.

But Martha and Mary are also doing something daring by welcoming this man into their home. Their reputations are definitely going to suffer. No wonder Martha is in a bit of a flap: if it is her home, she is the one who has taken the bold decision to invite Jesus in.

If Paul's letters are anything to go by, Luke's first readers, the earliest Christians, would have been meeting in just such homes, and would have been debating whether or not women could be hosts and leaders of their gatherings. Luke, with his well-known interest in women, is suggesting that Jesus set them a precedent here.

Luke goes on to show Jesus specifically commending Mary for sitting at his feet and listening to him. Students might sit at the feet of rabbis to learn, but women didn't. If women were present at all, it was simply to provide food and drink, and to remain quietly out of sight. Once again, for Luke's first readers this would have played into the discussion about women disciples. Were they just here to enable and facilitate the men's vocations, or could they be true disciples themselves? Luke is saying that Jesus has already answered that question.

It is ironic that this vignette of the full participation of women in the mission of Jesus should have turned into a story about a fallen woman and her harassed sister! If we take the context seriously, Jesus' words to Martha are a clear call: women, like men, need to put discipleship above everything else.

Application

And that is surely the point. Like Martha, we are all "worried and distracted by many things". There are so many things that have real claim upon our time and our hearts, where we feel justified in saying with indignation, "We can't all be contemplatives. Someone has to do the work!"

And, of course, that is true. But we must not let our worries and duties mask our real nature, or most important task, which is to be disciples of Jesus.

Sunday Homily

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

24 JULY 2022

YEAR C

“How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Luke 11:13

Illustration

Each one of us is a unique child of God. So each of us prays in our own way – expressing our relationship to God in the way that comes most easily to us. But sometimes we are lost for words. Sometimes we are depressed, not sure of ourselves, anxious, fearful and we know we need to pray but find we can't. It is then that the promise mentioned in the letter to the Romans comes to our rescue (Romans 8:26). The Holy Spirit of God dwells in us, so we can let the Holy Spirit pray in us. Jesus himself shows us the way. And when the disciples need to know more, he teaches them how to pray.

Gospel Teaching

Today we hear Jesus leading his disciples into greater awareness of discipleship. They were with him, talking, listening, eating, sleeping in his company, but they understood prayer to be something different from their direct interaction with him. They had a model of prayer which fitted their Jewish culture and time: formal, precise and fitting a required format. They were familiar, as Jesus was, with the prayers of the Psalms.

But they were to understand that God is flexible in his listening and that presence is as important as words. They were in Jesus' company and yet did not recognise this as prayer. They were preaching the good news and healing but still they wanted what John's followers had: a formula, a set of words which said what they thought was missing from their lives. They were searching for something lost, or not yet discovered.

As usual, Jesus offered them much more than they expected. He did not give them a theory about how to pray, or a lecture on the nature and purpose of prayer. He didn't rebuke them for their lack of insight into the nature of their fellowship with him. He didn't give them techniques for breathing and for concentration, or ways of avoiding distraction, so that they could become "professional" in their prayers. Instead, he inducted them into his own relationship with God.

He gave them a new insight into the nature of our God, "Abba", (Daddy) in place of the formal term for a mighty and distant God. He showed them a side to

the Almighty, to his relationship with God and their own, which they had never before experienced, one of intimacy and intensity and all-embracing love, the kind of love and sacrifice which offered them all that a loving parent gives to a beloved child and much greater than that which friends share. The prayer he gave them contains everything which human beings need for their well-being, but which God knows even before we utter it. In their search for God, Jesus gave the disciples the perfect formula until they fully recognised the full reality of who it was that gave it to them.

Application

To want to search for God is, in itself, a gift of God. To search is to find because Jesus, who is the bridge between heaven and earth, and the Holy Spirit, at the heart of all prayer, provide the practical teaching and the spiritual inspiration which draw us towards the truth. We often search in the vain hope of finding our lost something when the uncertain world cannot provide the security we need. Frequently it is in this state of vulnerability that we find God, because our reaching out is sincere and usually in the complete faith which can risk everything, because there is nothing to lose.

It is for times like these that we were given what we know as the Lord's Prayer. It is all we need, if needing words at all. For it has been said that one minute with our full attention given to God with our whole presence is enough; God is not limited by our notions of time. Jesus understood our reliance on concrete terms, the recognisable formula and our need to express our yearnings in ways which convince us – and it is our needs that we are thinking of.

The Lord's Prayer says everything we need to say in words and brings us into God's presence as surely as the disciples were present to the person of Jesus. We can pray with confidence, certain that our prayer is heard.

Sunday Homily

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

31 JULY 2022

YEAR C

“One’s life does not consist in
the abundance of possessions.”

Luke 12:15

Illustration

In Bach’s Cantata 82, the bass soloist repeats the haunting refrain that gives the song its title: “Ich habe genug.” I have enough. Composed for the feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary in 1727, the cantata expands on Simeon’s words as he holds the infant Jesus, the words Christians still say as the Nunc Dimittis at evening prayer: “Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled.”

In the cantata, we hear: “I have enough, for I have taken the Saviour into my arms. I have enough; I have seen him, my faith has held Jesus to my heart. I have enough!”

And at that point, as in Simeon’s original praise, the singer is happy to die. Music critics call this a gloomy song, with its focus on death: a description also applied by some commentators to today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel. Are they perhaps missing the point?

Gospel Teaching

The parable Jesus tells of the rich fool and his barns is not about death, but about life: about the way to live, not about the need to die. Jesus tells it in answer to an interruption from someone in the crowd while he was talking to his disciples about his identity and their mission to tell others about him. Into this discourse comes the jarring demand for Jesus to arbitrate in a property dispute.

Jesus replies first with a question: “Who set me to be judge over you?” Not a rhetorical question, for there’s irony here: it was God who appointed Jesus, as we say in the creed, to judge the living and the dead, when he comes again in glory. For the moment, though, Jesus was not there to judge, least of all to settle family squabbles over land or goods.

Cautioning his listeners to shun greed of any kind, Jesus reminds them that life is more than possessions: life is a loving relationship with God. That is what we were made for. When our earthly life is over, our possessions are left behind; but if we have cultivated our relationship with God, then life goes on in God’s eternal kingdom. Faith in God, in God’s love for us as revealed in Jesus, is all we need. It is enough.

Jesus isn't saying that we should have no material possessions at all, shouldn't enjoy the good things God has given us – or that we should focus entirely on the one apparent certainty in our lives: their end! For there is another certainty: the love of God, a love that teaches us the value of giving, rather than receiving.

The rich fool had enough, and to spare, of material possessions. Specifically, he had food – so much that he couldn't store it all. Did others around him have enough food? Did he bother to find out? Did he call to mind God's frequent insistence through the prophets that we should feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give to the poor?

Application

We do not know the hour of our own death, or of Christ's coming again in glory, so all our carefully laid plans for increasing our material wealth in this world may come to nothing. If the investment we make is in our spiritual wealth, however, we can be sure of a rich dividend. If we seek the Spirit's treasures of love, joy and peace, they will be multiplied in the next life.

Let us look this week at the needs of others, and be prepared to give of our own abundance to those who do not have enough: to give our time, our talents, our money to help those in need; to share our faith with those who have yet to recognise God's love. This is not a way of earning our salvation, but simply helps us appreciate it. The more we absorb the commandments to love God and our neighbour, and the more we allow our lives to be guided by those precepts, the less preoccupied we will become with our own possessions and the less we need fear death.

Enough, they say, is as good as a feast. And the feast we have come together to share today is a reminder of God's all-sufficient love and a taster of that feast we will share in heaven. Feed on him in your hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving. For if we have faith, we have enough.