



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-August 21st 2022

Readings: Isaiah 66: 18-21, Psalm 116, Hebrews 12: 5-7, 11-13

Luke 13: 22-30

They say, 'What goes around comes around.' You won't find that in so many words in the Book of Proverbs because it belongs more properly in the laws of Karma – the mechanistic system that is not over familiar with the concepts of grace and mercy. But there are moments when one just has to be grateful for a bit of cheap philosophy.

Last week was 'family week' in our house. Most of the tribe pitched up to join in that merry and chaotic reunion. Recovering from Covid, I sat, for the most part, on the margins quietly observing the glorious dynamic of our rumbustious and much-loved contribution to the future of humanity.

My elder grandson, Sebastian, six, fiercely bright and with the finely honed skills of a barrack room lawyer, was doing something from which he had been asked to desist – nothing major, just irritating. His aunt, Alice, now nursing Noah, the latest addition to our joyful throng, advised him accordingly. Sebastian, metaphorically, adjusted his wig and gown and went into full defence mode only to be cut short by the peremptory command of his aunt.

'This is not a negotiation. I am the adult here. What I say goes. End of..' And it was. I could have punched the air. Thirty years on she had got the message and was passing it on! Hallelujah !

I mention this because this morning's text from the Letter to the Hebrews deals with the uncomfortable business of discipline. I can never read this passage without hearing it quoted by the late Professor Buick Knox, a Scot whose every utterance was wreathed in deep Presbyterian gloom. 'Whom the Lord (Laird) loveth, He chastisteth', the old version captures it best. You fully expect him to add the old lie, cane in hand as your trousers descend, 'This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.'

We have moved a long way since then and, while most of my generation's stories of 'discipline' would have eager lawyers reaching for their compensation files, the modern problem is at the other extreme. The word 'NO' is considered a blight on freedom, a curtailment of inherent rights, a parental prejudice to be contested at every twist and turn. This has crept into much modern theological thinking and spread like invisible poison. We are back at the beginning, in Eden, with the Satanic questioning of divine authority – 'Did God really say....?'

Of course there are perversions of discipline.....I think of some of the creepy martyrs who actively sought cruelty and death or the modern psychopaths who think bombing a crowd of innocents will make God's day and fast track them to the best couches in Paradise.

But discipline is a fact of parental life and its wisdom springs from the Father. Not to discipline is an act of utter indifference to the wellbeing of the child and a supreme carelessness. We put the effort in, tedious and exhausting and repetitive as it often is, because we love them and want the best for them. It is, I might add, the same for God. How often do we need reminding? Re-educating? Reforming?

Of course discipline is not co-terminous with punishment. Discipline is from the word 'disciple' – one who is being taught. We are learning to be like Christ and that is a tall order. The chastisements, punishments, corrections are not pointless acts of divine cruelty, arbitrary outbursts of irrational anger. They are formative, creative, restorative and, in the end, liberating. God wants the best for His children and that is Christ and the way of Christ leads via the Calvary. Suffering is part of the deal of love.

There is a chapter in one of Jordan Peterson's, the Canadian psychologist, books (Twelve Rules for Life) which has the self-explanatory title - 'Don't let your children do things that will make you not like them.' It's a good rule and one that I think God might have cottoned on to a long time ago. We, like Him, love our children but sometimes, again like Our Father, we may not like them when they are incorrigibly naughty.

Some naughtiness is quickly resolved. One of my children, when small, started to bite people. After agonising about the problem for a couple of days, I bit him back. Shocked and outraged, he got the point. It was the end of the problem.

Another child has a dangerous fascination with fire. I taught him to channel that dangerous talent into a daily laying and ceremonial lighting of the fire.

Teenagers often descend, in the West, into an impenetrable hormonal sloth. This is unnecessary. We all have hormones. Kids in the third world have hormones but no time to indulge them in the battle for existence. Get out of bed and get on with it.

Old people, I speak from experience,.... often cultivate a resentful resignation and descend into a permanent grumpiness. If that's you, there's something wrong with you. Even your dog gets better food and

medical treatment than most of humanity throughout history. Pay attention to reality. Get to confession and start giving thanks. If God chastises us, it's because He loves us. Rejoice! Discipline is about learning, growing up, becoming like Christ. Penitence and gratitude are the hallmarks of the disciples of Jesus.

Later that evening Sebastian sat next to me and quietly vouchsafed, 'Grandad....children can be very silly, can't they?' I gently agreed. I could have added, 'Actually, adults can be very silly too.' But I think he may know that and that seemed to be a conversation for another time.