



24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C

The Balance of Prayer

A homily by Fr Robbie Low

Readings: Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14; Ps 50; 1 Timothy 1: 12-17, Luke 15: 1-32

Over the years I have come to recognise that there is an imbalance in the pattern of my spirituality. 'Not in you, father, surely', I hear you cry. But those who know me well will, I fear, all too readily attest to the fact that I am not perfect. Their surprise may lie in the revelation that I too have recognised this shocking truth and realised that action must be taken to remedy this faulty lean and 'right' this listing ship. The corrective action may be urgent and dramatic but it must also be the gradual and determined task of each day's prayer. Of what do I speak?

Well, it was signalled up to me in the lection readings for this Sabbath Day – both the ordinary time readings and the readings for the feast. Both sets, in the Old Testament lection recall the impertinent ingratitude of Man for God's mercy. The Gospels, that disclosure to Nicodemus of the whole summation of salvation history in that one epic verse – 'for God so loved the world that He gave....', and the ordinary time gospel of

the Prodigal Son, proclaim the profligate generosity of God, climaxing in the Cross of Christ and preview Man's history long ungrateful response.

Initially I was watching a small boy, at the supermarket checkout ahead of me, nagging his mother ceaselessly until he got the sweeties he wanted. Having been temporarily gratified, his perfunctory and enforced thanksgiving was swiftly replaced by the next demand. And it struck me, and not for the first time, how very like that wretched and unattractive child I could be in my prayer life. The balance between my asking of God and my thanksgiving was massively distorted.

Like a child with its Christmas list for Santa, my entreaties to God, once answered, all too often were met by the briefest of thanksgivings and the consequent lack of appreciation of His mercy and His bounty and rapidly overtaken by my next 'wish list'.

In the great parable of the Prodigal Son we meet the 'gimme, gimme, gimme' boy who wants it all and wants it now ! Having got it, his behaviour is wasteful and ungrateful and self-destructive. Running parallel with it is the behaviour of the freed Hebrew slaves in the wilderness. They have been freed by an almighty act of deliverance by God, one they will remember and celebrate down the millennia to this very day. Yet, as early as these scenes in the Book of Numbers, they are moaning and bitching and complaining and – setting up false material gods to usurp the One True God in their affections. In a related passage in the same book is a passage that would be funny if it were not so tragic.

In both Numbers Ch 11 & 21 we read of this complaint. Remember these are the same people who were having their children murdered by the State, their lives reduced to harsh slavery and any rights as human beings overridden by cruelty. Here, set free, becoming God's people in

the Wilderness, their memories have become utterly warped.

Gratitude has evaporated like the morning mist. 'Oh', they cry out, 'do you remember how good it was in Egypt? That lovely fish, the onions and garlic, the melons and the cucumbers?'

'Instead we are stuck in this blasted wilderness with only this cakey old Manna, the bread the Lord provides. If only we were slaves again.....'

There is no real remembrance and thus no abiding gratitude. The remedy for us, of course, lies in our focus on the Mass where we find, at its climax, the Sacrificial gift of God's love – the Holy Cross- and are duly humbled.

In the story of the Prodigal the story is reversed but for similar reasons. Not grateful for what he has received, he is profligate to the point of ruin. Only when he has lost everything does he appreciate what he had and offers to return, not initially in penitence but in self-interest and survival to be the slave of the Father whose love he has abused and betrayed.

As those in the process of becoming the People of God and sometimes finding the journey a tough one, we must never lose sight of where we have come from and where we are heading – from slavery and death to the Land of the Promise. The rebalancing of our prayer lives will help us get the right perspective here as we seek to spend more and more time in thanksgiving – for as St Augustine reminds us – 'What do we have that we were not given?' – and less time with our prodigal demands. It is not that our prayers of asking are wrong. Every father loves to hear the true desires of his children though he already knows what they need. It is, rather, that we need to see our gifting from Him and reorder our lives in the light of grateful hearts.

And here the Mass comes daily to our aid for it flies on the twin engines of penitence and thanksgiving.

We begin in sorrow for our failures and we end in that long hymn of thanksgiving which is at the centre of the Liturgy, the Eucharistic Prayer, the beating heart of the Mass. Here we are led to the supreme gift of God in the Calvary of Christ and the embrace of the returning sinner and the unbelievably generous and utterly undeserved welcome home. (In the Anglican calendar this feast was known confusingly as 'The Invention of the Holy Cross' – not to consign it to the realm of fairy tale but from the Latin 'Invenio', meaning I find, I meet, I encounter. It recalls not only the historic moment when the Christian Emperor reclaimed the True Cross from the thieving Persians but more especially to recall us to the finding of the True Cross in our own lives. From that it is a short step to Eucharist - glorious thanksgiving)

We teach children to say, 'Thank you' often. It is a lesson for us to re-learn.

To return to my opening metaphor....This rebalancing of our prayers shifts the cargo of our little craft so that we are no longer listing, like our Hebrew forebears, under the culture of complaint, taking in water – the bilge pumps of penitence jammed, going round in spiritual circles of self-absorption or heading for the rocks of despair and doubt but rather, with grateful loving hearts cargo secured, the Cross our masthead, our sails filled with the Spirit's wind, head confidently to harbour home.

As my ever joyful old friend Angelo, in the Bar Farnese, Rome, often remarks in open prayer, as he passes among his streetside coffee tables:-

'Grazie Mille.' – A thousand 'Thank Yous' – And that is just the beginning.

Addendum:

People often ask, 'But, what can I do practically?'

I find the following simple and brief spiritual exercise disproportionately powerful and sometimes give it as a penance

Spiritual Exercise: (3 mins)

Stand before a crucifix (or Twelfth Station of the Cross).

First minute: Simply ask His forgiveness for our sins. Say 'I 'm sorry'.

Second minute: For His great love and mercy..... Say 'Thank you'

Third minute : Offer Him your heart.....Say 'I love you'