

Homily 28th Sunday of the Year (B) Sunday 11th October, 2009.

Mass Readings: Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30

A cow and a pig were out for a walk one day. The pig was depressed, and the cow was worried about him. Being a kind and gentle sort she asked the pig what the problem was, and after a long silence the pig told her the source of his depression.

“Nobody likes me. They all speak badly of me. They cannot insult each other without bringing me into it. Just the other day I heard a mother say that her son’s room was like a pig-sty. Someone else was described as eating like a pig, while another snored like a pig. They always have to refer to me when they speak badly of each other. They don’t do that when they speak about you. Oh no, they say you have lovely eyes.”

“But surely you know the reason for that?” said the cow.

“No, I don’t,” said the pig.”

“Well, look at all I give them. I give them milk, and butter, and cream, and cheese.”

“But what about me? Look at all I give them, bacon, rashers, ham, pork, sausages, brawn and trotters – even my brains and toes for heaven’s sake!!”

“Ah, but there’s a difference,” isn’t there said the cow.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a difference in the manner of giving. I give it to them while I am still alive; they have to kill you to get anything out of you!”

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” You must die. Dying is the key to life, because without this there can be little growth and little love. *“Those who lose their lives will find them.”* Jesus teaches. Growth always involves dying, and so does love. To love is to die. You leave the womb and die to its comforts and securities, you die when you go from primary to secondary school, you die when you get married, you die when you become a parent, you die when you move house, when someone close to you dies you die, as when you surrender to another point of view, or enter into a new challenge. To love is to die. Every parent teaches this. Children must learn this if they are to grow into mature adults who don’t expect the entire world to revolve around them and their needs. Saying thank you, saying sorry, saying excuse me; it’s all a manner of dying, the way to growth, the way to loving. The moral and spiritual life isn’t about duty primarily; that’s the important consequence of something else. The moral life, the life of faith and of growth in the Spirit is about relationship, relationship with the One who loves us into all truth – it’s about intimacy with Christ. He teaches us how to die. Prayer, simply receiving and holding the loving gaze of Christ, is the source of all our ministry, all our mission, all our Christian endeavour. To die means to be loved into fuller life by Jesus Christ. He can only meet me in this moment. This moment is everything. In this moment lies my contribution to the peace of the world. Only in this moment can I lay down my life. Only in this moment can I see Christ steadily looking at me, only in this moment can I meet Him. Only in this moment can He love me. Only in this moment can he change me. And I’m not saying we have always to feel this. Perhaps I feel nothing. Perhaps I must let go in the dark, perhaps I’m afraid, unsure, with only blind hope to guide me – there is no greater love shown than in this gift of oneself. He can only meet me, use me, in this moment.

Mark recalls how Jesus looked at the young man steadily and loved him. The path to eternal life is to hold oneself in the gaze of Christ, for only in that can we be changed into His likeness. The young man doesn't notice that look, and precisely because of that he goes away sad, because he thinks that he has to do this alone. What must I do to inherit eternal life, win it, earn it? Heaven cannot be earned, it can only be received. That look from Christ is the context of all our prayer and growth. Only love moves us, deepens us, changes us, because we can only die to something when we realise that there is a love for us that is deeper than the fear we have inside that wants us to keep hold of things for ourselves. The elder brother in the story of the Good Samaritan - he was a really good boy, responsible, hard-working, dutiful, but he hadn't seen the loving look of his father who said to him, "All that I have is yours" after the boy had complained about his feckless younger brother and that he'd done his duty often enough. It's not about that.

This young man is honestly searching and Jesus loves this, but wants to offer something more. This guy would prefer some more tasks at which he could excel and for which he could be admired. Instead he's offered a relationship, a journey, a dying, a loss of control he'd prefer not to have. "Go, sell, give, come and follow" – five paths to die for. "No thanks."

The danger is always that we can hide away from real life and real love, real cost and the ultimate summons to deeper things. True love involves pain, loss, death, sacrifice, commitment. Only this Jesus offers. Only this is everything. For as He says: "*Those who lose their lives for my sake will find them.*" We also can go away sad – avoiding the gaze of Christ. We can sentimentalise love, trivialise relationships and be cynical about life-long commitment, and imagine that death isn't going to happen to me for years to come so it doesn't really matter about how I live today; that I'm not going to be called to account for my life anyway. And it doesn't matter about life in the womb because it isn't really human, nor about the planet because I shall be long gone – and a whole host of things. "*How happy are you who are poor,*" Jesus says, not simply because your bank account doesn't run into lots of figures, but because you have learned how to die, that you know what really matters - those five things that Jesus asked the young man to do - to go, to sell, to give, to come, to follow - which the rich young man refused to do, because he thought he had to do it all by himself and he didn't, but he didn't see that. This young guy was too scared of being that vulnerable, of acknowledging that love is superior to duty. We will always go away sad until we learn that.

I was once walking along Victoria Street in London to Westminster Cathedral and was stopped by a young man very sadly and gloomily handing out tracts about Christ. I gladly took one and told him of my faith. But whatever I said it couldn't please him. I came up with all the correct evangelical answers to his questions but no it was no good. I think my being a Catholic wasn't a help probably. So in the end I said to him: "Look, be happy, most of the folk walking up and down this street don't give two hoots about our Saviour but you have met someone who loves Him – so rejoice!" Glum face. "I've one final question for you," he said. "What's that?" "If you were to die now this minute and go to the gates of heaven and if the Lord Himself was to say to you, 'Give me one good reason why I should let you in here,' what would you answer?" "Because you love me." How else could I enter? There's no other way, no other reason, no other qualification. Let that be your prayer this week: "No matter what Lord, I will come to you – because you love me."

