

Homily 29th Sunday of the Year (B) Sunday 18th October, 2009.

Readings: Isaiah 53:10-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

Here's a parable. Three sets of contestants line up for a race around the local supermarket. This race is a sort of game in which each set of the contestants is invited to grab as much of the most expensive items on display as possible, within a space of two minutes, and place them on their trolley. The contestants who, within that time, manage to grab the most of the dearest items and place them in their trolley are the winners. Well these contestants set off, and two sets of them race around up and down the aisles, grabbing as much of the merchandise as they can. The other set of contestants simply seem to amble along picking off the shelves one or two simple things as they pass – bread, milk. When one of the racing contestants roars by and drops something, the slower ones help them to put it back on their trolley. Eventually the two minutes are up and the speedy contestants wait breathlessly for the slow coaches to arrive. While they are waiting they get into an argument looking at each other's trolley, wishing they had grabbed more of the expensive stuff themselves, saying, "Where did you get that, I wish I'd found those," etc. In fact they would probably have started fighting if the others hadn't eventually turned up.

"Why have you got so little in your trolley, have you no idea what this is all about?" The speedy contestants ask.

The slower contestants say, "Well, we just took off the shelves what we thought we needed."

"But that's not what all of this is about you fools, the whole point is to get as much as you possibly can within the limited time that we have, didn't you realise that?"

"Well, we took just what we needed."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

There was a pause and then the others said, "Well, you see, our father owns the supermarket."

Two things are, without doubt, unavoidable in our lives. One is death and the other is suffering. Whatever else, those two are guaranteed. Hopefully there will be joy and happiness, lots of it, and peace and contentment, but they cannot be guaranteed in quite the same way that death and suffering can be. Suffering has an inevitability attached to it, and of course death is one hundred per cent certain for each of us, our own, and that of those near and dear to us. We come screaming out of the womb and inevitably bump and scratch and tumble our way through childhood – that's if we're fortunate. For many there is the separation between parents to negotiate and all its associated repercussions. And for the rest of the journey the cup of hurts and the baptism of fire is never far from any of us. That's just how it is.

One of the greatest of life's challenges is how to deal with suffering, our own and that of others; how to relate to it because, given its inevitability, I have to deal with it, I can't ignore it. There are many ways of trying to ignore it; we're surrounded by pain-killers, which for a time may offer temporary distraction – from chocolate to shopping to alcohol to cocaine. But, as their devotees know only too well, temporary dispensation is all they offer. In the end the loneliness, fragility, heart-ache, and all the sheer mind-bogglingly beautiful confusion of being human returns and is inescapable.

There is obviously and rightly in us the desire to avoid suffering at all costs – simply because it hurts. Our faith offers us, and the presence of Christ among us offers us the possibility, however, the invitation, of experiencing our humanity, in all its beauty and fragility and its suffering, not simply as something endlessly puzzling but, paradoxically, something deeply enriching, enlarging – gratifying. Jesus teaches us today that suffering, especially that suffering entered into for the service of others, is infinitely far from being a path to ruin, but rather a way to honour – and freedom. True honour, like true happiness, doesn't come to those who seek it for its own sake; it's rather a joyful consequence for those who don't seek it, who seek the love and service of others instead. True happiness and honour and freedom and joy cannot be sought for their own sake, they are the natural consequence, in us, of true selflessness. *“Give and there will be gifts for you – a full measure pressed down, shaken together and overflowing, will be poured into your lap, because the standard you use will be the standard used for you.”* (Luke 6:38)

Our Father owns the supermarket. He owns the universe, the planet, my life, me – everything in me.

*You created my inmost self,
knit me together in my mother's womb.
For so many marvels I thank you;
a wonder am I, and all your works are wonders.*

*You knew me through and through,
my being held no secrets from you,
when I was being formed in secret,
textured in the depths of the earth.*

*Your eyes could see my embryo.
In your book all my days were inscribed,
everyone that was fixed is there.*

*How hard for me to grasp your thoughts,
how many, God, there are!
If I count them, they are more than the grains of sand;
if I come to an end, I am still with you.
(Psalm 139:13-18)*

Hidden within this truth is the invitation to see all my pain, therefore, not only as a stumbling-block but as nourishment, as a gift, an opportunity. God's loving presence within me pre-dates everything – the best and the worst. He knows everything about me, and He can transform everything. In the supermarket I need to grab at nothing because all is mine already, all is gift, all is there for me. The pagans lord it over one another, and make their authority felt, because in the end no one cares for them, therefore, in their perception, cares for no one else either, and they are accountable to no one. However intelligently and sophisticatedly secular atheism may be presented, and however reasonably couched and argued it is, it's basically the law of the jungle since for the secular atheist nothing has a loving origin or a loving purpose or a loving fulfilment. Ultimately the powerful are accountable to no one and nothing but their own appetites. If the universe is merely a supermarket, albeit a wonderful supermarket, and if it is

no more than a quite miraculous accident then nothing within it is sacred, nothing can speak to the depth of me – it's only temporarily functional, not of eternal significance. My life and your life is a random inexplicable blip holding no loving secrets from Another and no eternal promise - the insignificance of now is all there is. Our faith, however, tells us that now is not insignificant but rather full of meaning.

Jesus offers us a radically different vision behind all things. His Father - our Father - owns the supermarket. I need to grab at nothing, for within God's providence there is nothing I shall need. "*The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.*" (Psalm 23:1) And I need reject nothing because if it is there, no matter what, it can be turned to good by the one who, as St Paul says, can turn all things to good for those who love Him. He, the one from whom nothing in heaven and nothing on earth can separate us.

James and John ask Jesus for a place of honour. Jesus offers them instead a journey of discovery; as He offered the rich young man last week, if you remember, an invitation to let go of himself, and to become himself a gift for others in Jesus' company. Jesus wanted to love him into this new freedom to live at the service of others; as He does with you and I. This same invitation and journey Jesus now offers to James and John, challenging their desire to be honoured themselves and instead to become a gift for others in their needs. "*Can you drink my cup, receive my baptism – can you come with me?*" Honour doesn't come to those who seek it. Happiness doesn't come to those who seek it. Life doesn't come to those who seek it, Jesus says. Honours, happiness, life, are rather the consequence of something else. They come almost as a surprise to those who make of themselves a gift in service to others, rather than a focus of others' attention and praise for themselves.

The most powerful and convincing missionary statement the Church currently possesses is not a document, nor a programme, nor a course, but your life lived in the service of others. It is particularly powerful and convincing when that offering is made in the face of ridicule, loneliness and emptiness, because then your actions point to Him whose victory in your life is a vibrant witness to His presence and action in the world, the One whose Father owns the supermarket, and who loves you, always has and always will, to whom be glory and honour for ever and ever. Amen