

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A – Reflection

I recall some years ago reading the story of a boy called Francis. Francis was born with an intellectual disability into a devout catholic family in France. He made his first communion at a church in Paris and there was the customary family gathering following the celebration. During this family time Francis's godfather and uncle went over to Francis' mother and said, "Wasn't it a beautiful service? You know, he said, the only sad thing is that the boy will never fully understand what was happening." Tears welled up in the mother's eyes, she had heard such comments like this before from well-intentioned people, and she just wished that others could see Francis the way she did and then just perhaps they would not be so quick to judge. She was about to say something but Francis beat her to it, he had looked up and immediately recognized the tears for what they were. He said to her, "Don't cry maman, Jesus loves me just as I am." The uncle was taken aback, as on that day he heard his godson mission to him and saw him with new eyes. No matter our ability or situation we all have a God given mission in life!

I was reminded of that little life story last week when I was enjoying watching Gardening Australia on the ABC. In a segment called '*Seaside Support*', Costa Georgiadis, the host of Gardening Australia heads to the northern Sydney's seaside suburbs to join a crew working to conserve coastal vegetation and protect it from the constant threat of invasive weeds. A team of people from a group called *Bushlink* provides employment for people with an intellectual disability and is helping to protect our fragile environment by keeping ecologically sensitive places weed-free. At one stage Costa asked one of the workers what the weed management process involved. The worker paused, thought about it for a few seconds, and then answered Costa, "well you see I dig it up and put it in a bucket and that kills it" ...hearing this response I thought to myself that he had it in a nutshell, stripped of unnecessary complexity, and that response was all that was really required. Costa asked another worker what it was they liked about their job, he replied, "it makes me happy!, so

Costa now getting the hang of this relationship interaction quickly says, “what is it that makes you so happy?, and the worker replied, “working with friends and helping them”. Another man commented, it’s a good community and I know I have done a good job at the end of the day!

It struck me once again that this is life pared down to its essentials, don’t we all, in our various ways, look to what these men had already gained, happiness, purpose and the satisfaction that comes from doing a good job in this life, just doing our best with what we have been given.

There is a great mystery that lies somewhat hidden in the lives of most people, including those who live with intellectual disabilities. We tend to see others as we see ourselves, but at the same time there is a dissonance that arises from seeing the difference in others. I admit to being a slow learner but I think that as I have grown older, I find myself more and more consciously interacting with others carefully, and hopefully insightfully, trying with the help of the Spirit to use the eyes and ears and sense that God has given me. I find that in so many special ways the people around us can show us that they are a true presence of Jesus and in doing so they minister to us.

This, I think, is part of what we call living life in the Spirit. Saint Paul tells us to be led by the Spirit is to walk according to the Spirit, to have the worldview of the Spirit, to be in the Spirit, to have the Spirit. The truth we are called to accept is that power of the Spirit is continuously at work in the world often in surprising and unexpected ways.

This is hinted at in today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Elsewhere Saint Paul contrasts or rather juxtaposes this living in the *Spirit* that he speaks of with the living in the *flesh*, this simple statement masks a complex explanation which I really can’t do justice to here, but perhaps I will just leave you today with a quote from Fr. Richard Rohr which I think may help rather than hinder our understanding of Pauls theology;

The closest meaning to Paul’s (“flesh” is the word) *sarx* (which) is today’s familiar word ‘ego’... *Sarx* or ego is the self that tries to define itself autonomously, apart from spirit, apart from the Big Self in God.

Paul would want us to understand that living this way, confined by our egos is not living to the fullest as God would wish for us.

If we are honest part of the problem is too often our world looks for and values strength in intellect and power, it looks to fame and fortune, the ability to own and accumulate wealth, it looks to value jobs with greater prestige and that demonstrate superior education. Not that these are bad values in and of themselves, but they certainly can be if they become ends in themselves, which our experience tells us so often becomes the case.

Our readings remind us that you and I follow Jesus who walks the talk of meekness, gentleness and humility. Today our gospel confronts us with Jesus telling us that vital life factors, indeed even issues of faith can be hidden from the clever and learned ones and instead be revealed to children or perhaps those of a less complex mindset. This rings so true in my own experience, I have studied theology for years, I have had the benefit of many exemplary teachers and role models, and I have been blessed with an enquiring mind that enjoys the intellectual pursuit but hopefully knows and accepts my limits. However I can honestly say to you that the most striking experiences of the presence of the Holy Spirit, has more often than not, been through the lives of ordinary everyday individuals and in what they say or do in their various situations in life, they stay in my mind and cause me to wonder about how great is God that God created us as an image of God.

In saying what I have said, I don't want to leave you with the impression that I am anti-intellectual, by no means...intelligence and learning are gifts from God and are good things. One of the problems the world faces is not listening enough to the experts and accepting that some have spent a lifetime acquiring knowledge for the sake of humanity. God gave us all that we have as gift and expects us to use what we have been given wisely for the good of society. But when we do this, we do need to keep our eyes closely focused on Jesus.

Our readings today began with the prophet Zechariah who we know virtually nothing about, but we do know that the book written in his name has a part we read today that looks to a joyous age when the

saviour-king will come to the people in meekness to establish peace. In our Gospel Jesus is the messianic Saviour King judging those who are unfaithful or faithful. The faithful, having come to Jesus and taken his yoke upon themselves, live in God's peace now, much like our friends looking after our environment, much like young Francis. These faithful ones need have no fear of judgment. Jesus looks to our hearts for signs of goodness and through the power of the Spirit works with what we have to offer, no matter how little.

At one stage I undertook some voluntary work with the then Victorian Ministry of Justice. I visited group homes where people with disabilities lived in supported care. I recall a story of a man speaking with a carer about a visit he had made that day to see a heart specialist. He was asked what had happened. "The doctor looked into my heart," he said. "Well, what did he see in your heart?", the carer asked. The man said "He saw Jesus, of course." The carer somewhat surprised and taken aback said; "What does Jesus have to do with your heart?" And the man said: "Jesus rests there." He is right you know, this is what our Gospels assure us. Jesus through the Holy Spirit comes to live in our hearts.

Whether one is intellectually gifted or not, poor or rich, young or old, all of us are endowed with unique and marvellous gifts of the heart, and this can open us to love in a special way. Maybe like Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, we may sometimes wonder if we have anything special to offer the world, well consider this, I have often been struck by how people will respond positively to our openness and a sharing of weaknesses rather than perhaps our successes and achievements. If we want to truly live in and with the Spirit than we need to have our life and worldviews aligned with that of a humble person, riding on a donkey, not looking for advancement or knowledge or power for its own sake, but simply for a personal relationship of love that will give all our lives meaning.

The question, as always, is that knowing what this will mean for our lives can we answer the question honestly and in the affirmative; are we really prepared to Yoke ourselves to Jesus?