

Homily for the 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time



Sr. Ella, the Salesian sister who used to work with me at the University, and I were sitting in the Chaplaincy one day and a very distraught young female student came in, who we both knew, in floods of tears. Bravely, I decided to delegate this to Sr. Ella and went to my office next door but could hear that the

problem was her boyfriend had dumped her and what should she do. Sr. Ella's response was, "Don't you go chasing after any of those boys, you are far too good for that. Man is the hunter, let him hunt. Don't you go chasing after them, it's his loss."

You might not approve of Sr. Ella's answer, but it made the young woman laugh.

And it explains today's first reading, which is about chasing a woman. This woman in particular in the reading is Wisdom.

The Book of Proverbs often describes Wisdom as a woman, and much of her role we see as the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Wisdom is that quality of God that enables us to be more like God, to live as God hopes, to be with God. Not a part of a Trinity, but an agent of God in Creation and in the lives of God's people.

The believer's life is one of search. And Wisdom is not easy to find. Here at the end of the Book, Wisdom has been found and is seen as one who gives us a good life, a life of peace and tranquillity.

So we have here the image of Wisdom as a perfect wife in 6th or 5th centuries BC, making a home for the believer.

(I am not sure why the Church gives its mainly celibate clergy the line "A perfect wife- who can find her?" to preach on. Most of us haven't.)

Now we might not like this imagery today. It doesn't fit with the language, the discourse, of today. However the reading has left out a great deal from the original.

It is a clever passage. A poem about Wisdom where each line begins with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order. (An acrostic, I think it is called.) What is missing is this. In the poem it also says about the woman: She controls her own household, runs the ordering of the servants, she buys and sells fields and vineyards with her profits, she is strong and knows her own business affairs well. She supplies merchants with her produce. She ensures that the servants are well and clothed. She is well-dressed, speaks wisely and instructs people kindly. Her husband sings her praises.

From this you get a better picture of the role of a woman at the time.

So, remembering that the first reading is there to help us interpret the gospel, in this first reading God is the husband and we are to aspire to the qualities of the perfect wife, with the help of Wisdom. The parable in the gospel is clearly about being a good disciple.

So what do we learn about discipleship?

Firstly that it is about a search. We are given gifts by God (all part of the work of what the Old Testament calls Wisdom) in our lives, from baptism. From the first reading as we heard it today, it is about being good, giving to the poor, and leading a good orderly life.

But if we add in the rest of the reading, what has been left out, it is clearly more than this apparently passive way of life. The 6th century wife was far from passive. It requires action, control, order, being productive, using your gifts, care for others in your life, and a life lived out in the market-place (or rather in society at large) not tucked away in a house.

In the gospel we tend to be worried about the treatment of the little guy with one talent. But it is not about that.

God gives gifts, responsibilities and direction. We see that in the way the Master organises everyone before he leaves.

We see from the use of those gifts that to bury what we have been given cannot be right.

And we learn that discipleship is a search, and a tough one at that, that requires real work in our lives. Jesus' extreme references at the end to the punishment of the 'one talent' guy, is not real, nor what he would advocate in real life, but an image of how important it is, what a responsibility we have, for us to find what gifts we have been given and use them. (And we all have them.)

Sometimes we think faith should just be there. Just appear. But it rarely is like that. It takes hard work and in many ways is far from satisfying as the results of our search are not always easy to see or feel.

It wasn't long before the young woman was once more romantically engaged with another guy, but her pain had been very real.

Finding faith, finding God, can be tough and it can hurt, and we can feel that God has dumped us at times, but, as the first reading said, the rewards, if we stick to the search, are beyond the price of pearls.