

## Homily for 25th Sunday of Ordinary Time

When I tried to picture the disciples arguing among themselves on the road as to who is the greatest among them, somehow my mind moved to the recent government reshuffle. Wondering what all the chatter was like among them, or about each other, as they waited, clutching their mobiles, for a call from the Prime Minister. As he sacked someone did the Prime Minister say something equivalent to: ‘Anyone who wants to be first, must make themselves last of all and servant of all,’ as they headed for the back benches?

To be fair to our MPs I do think that a great many of them do want to serve, and the question of power is a tricky one for them, as their party needs to be ‘in power’ to put into effect what they want to do, but the temptation to personal power must be great for some, to go off the straight path. As human beings most of us know what it is to lose our way at some time. How we can begin well and then get diverted. How jealousy can be, envy can be what ignites this in us, so we get the early story of Cain and Abel. How we can seek an escape from facing the world at times, which takes us into a world we never thought we would find ourselves in. How then do we then find our way back?

The Cenacolo Community, that has been with us for so long, is one particular way, for people who have gone off the path to find their way back. When our struggle is not with power but with an addiction of another form of addiction that can come hit us the result of any struggle with life. (As you know the house is closed at the moment but we hope that it will reopen at some time and we keep open our contacts with the main house in Italy, and still can refer people for help to Ireland or elsewhere. So please keep it in your prayers.)

But when you enter the community, however great and whatever your gifts may be, your distinguishing gifts you might say, you begin by being asked to use none of them but help look after the community in the simplest of chores. (As it can be just these gifts that create the pressure to achieve, from ourselves or others, even parents, or a desire to be better that can lead to addiction.)

One person who wrote about this gospel passage was looking at what ‘being the least’ could mean. One answer he came up with was that it did not mean only the poorest and weakest of society, but it could also refer to what we might call the lowest common denominator amongst ourselves. So ‘the least’ meant what it was to be simply human and nothing more. It was the heart of us, before all else was added, all our gifts, all the things good and bad that might distinguish us from each other. It was what was common to us all. So by putting a child in the centre, Jesus was trying to take the disciples back to a purer simplicity (though children are not without complexity, I know) but the image that Jesus is seeking that of an innocence that does not judge.

And we see that sometimes when children choose friends who we might think, ‘Well, that is not the friend I would have chosen for them,’ but the child did not judge as we might. They did not see the whole background of family and behaviour (real or imagined), religion or race, social problems, they saw just the person.

There is something else about the very small child too, the baby, that when we are in a baby’s presence it brings something out of us that is naturally good. People are drawn to focus on it and will often smile when they see a child (and as any preacher knows people will concentrate on the baby more than you.) Not only that but a baby somehow crosses boundaries we cannot. My niece took her baby into see my mother the other week, and although my mother has difficulty speaking and communicating, her face lit up when she saw her great-granddaughter.

At the same time we are rightly horrified by any attacks on children, and shocked by the cases of abuse that hit the headlines from time to time, and which social workers have to deal with day in day out.

How do we find our way back, or just find our way? Jesus’ first remarks today are about his death and resurrection. He begins by calling himself ‘Son of Man.’ There are two aspects to this. One is that it is a title we know and hear of in the New Testament for Jesus. When we hear it we mean him. But in the Old Testament the prophets would on occasion use it about themselves, both as one who God was speaking through. But also its meaning was almost like ‘everyman,’ or ‘every person’ we should say. The prophet was one through whom God spoke and who yet seemed to represent all of us in a relationship with God. So Jesus makes it clear here that he is one of us, and that this death, his death, is for everyone regardless of who they are.

Then how do we find our way to be part of this? Jesus knows only too well our openness to temptation. Firstly then he gives us the image of the child as the weaker or poorer person (the anawhim of the Old Testament). Of seeking a path of humility through their example and service to them. Then he gives us this sense of reaching for the core of what it is to be a human being that we all share, and building in ourselves a real feeling of love for our brothers and sisters, who are just as we are deep down.

In many ways these gospels that we are listening to over these weeks bring us to the same place. They are about what it is to be a disciple of Jesus. How we get there. But what he makes clear at the end of this gospel is that he is the Way.

Anyone who can find this path, finds Jesus, and anyone who finds him, finds the Father too.