

13th Sunday Ordinary Time - Homily

On a trip to London I went off to the National Maritime Museum to see an exhibition of Canaletto's paintings, but while I was there spent a bit of time in the main museum and as ever wandered into the shop, and bought a book there on Sextants (used for navigation in the old days) and about maritime, sea, exploration. Sometimes by chance you pick up a great book just to fill in the time while you are having a coffee. At the end of the book there is a quote from John Ruskin, who used to live by Coniston in the 19th century.

This is what he said about travelling:

“All travel becomes boring in exact relationship to its speed. Going by railroad I do not consider travelling at all; it is merely ‘being sent’ to a place, and very little different from being a parcel...But if, going forward...slowly, after some days we approach some interesting scenery this is one of the most exquisite enjoyments possible to a healthy mind, and real knowledge is acquired here regardless of the purpose of travel, getting a true sense of the space we are passing through, a true sense of our world and its breadth.”

So what he is saying is that proper travelling is when we enjoy the actual journey, experience the land we are going through, as well as our target, otherwise we are just like parcels. His main horror was the new railroad travel. Imagine what he would make of Manchester Airport on a usual busy day, and the idea of everyone squeezing into a metal tube, a Jet2 plane, to land in Ibiza or Tenerife, passing over, and ignoring, some of the most beautiful countryside in the world.

Obviously we use air travel for its speed and convenience, but, and I mention this just as an aside, it is noticeable that the more we demand convenience like that the more we damage the environment. However after a wet summer in Cumbria the sun of the Canary Islands is a big draw.

But behind all this is the fact that sometimes in life we aim for a target and so do anything necessary to reach it, ignoring what is happening to us, or not, on our way. For example, imagine going to seminary to be a priest is a journey, it is possible to say, “I want to be a priest and for this I have to get through six years of seminary, and whatever happens I will keep my head down, ignore everything around me, until I get out the other side.” So the guy ends up doing very little, risking very little, changing not at all, in those years. They are dead years. If he reaches his goal, he has not grown at all (not helpful for a priest), if he leaves early as many do, he has wasted three years. If he had invested energy and interest instead on this journey, whatever happened he would have grown in some way.

We can do this in all walks of life. It applies to going to university for example. I have to reach a goal of getting a degree. So I just do the necessary to get what I want, never get involved in anything or with anyone, and so nothing is really happening in my life in those years. I may even come out with what I thought was the prize, but learnt nothing personally.

So what has this got to do with the gospel today?

Jesus announces that he is setting his face for Jerusalem. Whereas in John's gospel Jesus goes back and forth to Jerusalem, in Luke's gospel this is the start of his journey to his

death, accompanied by his disciples, and very much based on the idea of the Exodus in the Old Testament, heading for the Promised Land. But it is not just about reaching Jerusalem, it is the journey itself that is important, (as Ruskin knew), because it is in this journey, like for the Israelites in the Old Testament, that the disciples are going to learn what it is to be a disciple, and what it will be to like to live as a follower of Jesus after he is gone.

So from the start the lessons begin.

What do we learn from the stories at the start of their journey?

The encounter with the Samaritans comes first. The disciples distrust them already as all Jews did as they were heretics, and possibly the Galileans, who lived nearby, most of all. But Jesus is not interested in punishing anyone who does not welcome him. He simply moves on to find people who will. Which tells us something about evangelisation.

Then three people approach Jesus on his journey. Now Jesus does not condemn them either, but what he says to them, and also to the disciples who are there, is “What are your priorities going to be?”

The first person simply asks to follow Jesus, but Jesus points out the difficulties of a disciples’ life. Most of us like to have a place we can call our own, a place where we feel comfortable, perhaps safe. But what is Jesus saying? The only base, the only sure thing we can rely on as disciples is Jesus himself, Jesus in our lives as we journey.

The second asks very reasonably, and the disciples would agree with him as it was a very important duty to bury your parents, to do that first. But for Jesus spreading the Word of God has to come first.

The third person simply wants to say goodbye. But no, if you take up the challenge of being a disciple, that challenge must come first.

When we read these stories most of us think, “Well, I know what I would do even if Jesus said that to me.” Some things we have to do, we are expected to do, they seem right.

But what Jesus is drilling into the disciples is that nothing is more important than sharing in the task he has been given.

What can we do? Sometimes when you go fell-walking you just want to get to the top. But if you ignore what is along the way, then you are missing out on the full experience.

We can aim for heaven. Keep our heads down, try not to sin, lead a quiet life. But if that is our approach our arrival at the gates will be only a partial success. Our real journey has to be one of growth into what it is to be a follower of Jesus. It requires risk. It requires a constant effort to put Jesus first, to work out what that means in our lives. How that is calling us to change.

Then we start to understand what it is to be a Christian. Chairman Mao used to say, with his little Red Book, that China had to be in a state of constant revolution.

So do we. But not with a book, but with Jesus. And never violently or in any way harming others, but on a voyage of discovery where the Bible acts as our sextant.