

Homily: Second Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021

I have a bad habit of coming into the church in the evening to say a few prayers without putting the lights on. There's enough ambient light to see where I'm going, and so as long as I don't have to read anything it doesn't cause any problems. At least, not normally. This week, while the painters have been in, lots of things have been moved around, so as I came into the church I nearly jumped out of my skin to see someone sat in one of the benches. Fortunately, it was just St Joseph (or at least, his statue) out of his usual position! Our senses get heightened at night, which makes us a bit more jumpy and more alert. So perhaps it's not a surprise that it was at night-time that the young Samuel first heard the voice of the Lord.

It's a story you may well have heard many times. Lying still in his bed, resting and remaining there, no doubt trying to sleep, he hears a voice calling His name. He presumes that it's the old priest, Eli, asking for help, and it's only the third time round that Eli understands what's really happening. And so he points Samuel to the Lord, and teaches him to say – to pray – “Speak, Lord, Your servant is listening.”

In the Gospel we hear of another wise leader pointing others to the Lord. John the Baptist and His disciples are standing still, it seems, remaining where they are, when Jesus walks past them. Immediately the Gospel is telling us something important. They are still, making no progress: the Lord is the one who is going ahead. And so, when John says to them “Look – behold – the Lamb of God”, they set off and follow Jesus. They are no longer still; they are now walking after Him. When the Lord turns to them, He asks, “What do you want?” – literally, it says, “What do you seek?” They ask Him where He lives. He does not answer the question, but instead issues an invitation: “Come and see”. If He had merely told them, maybe they would have stayed where they were. But Jesus wants them to make progress, to walk forward, to follow Him and share His life. They do, and they remain with Him for the rest of the day.

Jesus asks this same question to everyone who follows Him: “What do you seek?” He asks us. Maybe we would answer that we seek peace, freedom, a deeper sense of being loved, conversion of our hearts to live more for love, an end to uncertainty and suffering... each of us will have our own response to His question. But His response to us is always the same: “Come.” Come and see; come and receive. Come and remain with me. In a sense, the answer to all our deepest longings is to remain with the Lord. It must be so, because the only place where we will be truly fulfilled is in heaven, and that is where we will remain with Him for ever.

The idea of remaining, of staying, is not always popular, perhaps especially in the midst of another lockdown. “You must stay at home,” we are told, and with good reason. But we feel constrained, restricted; we do not feel free. Yet there are people who choose this as a way of life. Many monks and nuns take a vow of stability, promising to remain in the same house, the same community, all their lives; in some cases rarely, if ever, leaving the confines of their monastery. They do so because they want to meet Christ, and they know

that endless activity, business, restlessness, always being on the move, prevents them from doing so. Their lives are witness to an important truth: wherever we are, however constrained we feel, we can always meet Christ. And to meet Him, to remain with Him – this may involve physical stillness, but it does not mean a stagnant life. The Lord is always journeying forward, always calling us to follow, always inviting us: “Come and see.” To remain with Him is always to make progress, for He is always leading us forward in faith, hope and love.

The same verb “to stay, to remain” comes up again much later in St John’s Gospel, when Jesus uses it to express something that is at the heart of the spiritual life: “As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me... Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love...” That is His constant invitation. “Come and see... remain in my love.” To remain with Jesus is to constantly move forward in love. Let’s not be content to stand still, but to follow where He leads, and to remain with Him, never tiring of His call or His presence, but trusting that to remain with Him and in Him is everything. Whatever we seek, the answer is to be found coming to Him, following Him, remaining in Him.

Fr Andrew

