

Homily: Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021

Now and again we hear something and think, “Yes, that really hits the nail on the head.” Sometimes it even happens when the person speaking doesn’t realise just how true their words are. They make a casual remark that hits on a deeper truth. It happens in the Gospel today. Jesus has left the house early in the morning, and Peter and the others set out in search of Him. When they find Him, Peter says, “Everybody is looking for You”. He doesn’t know how true his words are. Everyone, whether they know it or not, is looking for Jesus. Every person who has ever needed forgiveness; every person who has ever needed healing; every person who has yearned for love; every person who will face death is looking for the Saviour: they – we – are all looking for Jesus.

We get a glimpse of this earlier in the Gospel today, when the whole town comes crowding around the door of the house where the Lord is staying. They bring before Him people who are sick, those who are possessed, and no doubt many who simply want to meet Him or hear Him speak. They come, we are told, “after sunset”, probably because once the sun goes down the sabbath day is over, and so work is once again allowed. Therefore the people are allowed to travel further and to carry others to the Lord. It strikes me how much of today’s Gospel takes place during this same night. After sunset the people come, and presumably for several hours, the Lord is ministering to the crowds. Undoubtedly it would have been a good excuse for Him to have a lie in the next morning.

Yet, we are told, before the night is over, Jesus is up and about. He leaves the house “long before dawn” and goes off to a lonely place, where He can be all by Himself. It’s a place where He can spend time in quiet prayer, time alone with His Father. There are striking contrasts in this night, in these hours of darkness: the frantic activity of healing and casting out demons could hardly be further from the stillness of our Lord at prayer. The whole town crowding round the door as the night began versus the solitude of Jesus at prayer as the night draws to its end. We see in this the needs we also have: the need for both company and solitude; the need to be active and productive, but also the need for quiet time spent with God, time given over to stillness in prayer.

When we think of Jesus leaving the house early in the morning, we could think of it as a kind of escape from the pressures He faced. But I wonder if something very different is going on here. When I came to the parish a little over four years ago, it was my first appointment as a parish priest (rather than as an assistant). I remember, during our handover conversations, Fr Loughran asking me, “What’s the first duty of a parish priest?” I fumbled around for an answer, wondering if he was thinking of celebrating the sacraments or preaching the Gospel. His answer was very simple: “to pray for your people”, he told me. And he was right. Each morning I try to pray for the people I expect to meet in my ministry that day, and often in the evening I remember in prayer people I have spent time with during the day, especially those who have particular sufferings. Surely our Lord did the same.

Jesus left the house long before dawn. He had already been up half the night attending to people in need, so He must have been tired, but He was up early, long before the sunlight awoke Him. There were no alarm clocks in those days. I wonder if Jesus couldn't sleep. Maybe His mind and heart were filled with the people who had come to Him, or maybe He was filled with thoughts of the work ahead of Him, the towns and villages He would visit as He continued His preaching. In this case, the Lord wasn't escaping for a moment's peace, but instead, He was bringing His people before the Father, continuing to minister to them. This quiet time of prayer is part of His gift to those in need, those He has come to save. In the hours of darkness, Jesus brings to the Father all who suffer, all who are afflicted by evil, all who need forgiveness, all who need hope, all who need salvation.

And so this scene points us to the cross. Then, as the land was again under cover of darkness for three hours, the Lord hung on the cross, surrounded by a crowd of people, and yet in many ways alone. There, He offered to His Father all those He had met during His earthly life: every person He had healed, forgiven or taught; and not only them, but also all those who had come before or would come after Him, all those who would need a Saviour: in other words, every human who has ever lived or will ever live. In the scene represented in today's Gospel, the work of salvation has already begun; the shadow of the cross already hangs over our Lord, even at this early stage in His ministry. Everybody is looking for Him, because everybody needs a Saviour. And in Him alone that need, that prayer, is answered.

Fr Andrew

