

Homily: 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

Today I'd like to tell you a story about a young man called Bradley. At least, that's what we'll call him. Bradley didn't have the easiest start in life: he was born in a deprived neighbourhood and his family didn't have a lot of money. They struggled on. Most of Bradley's friends had little ambition to make a real success of their lives, but Bradley was different. He always dreamed that life could be better, and he would work hard to make sure he achieved his goals. So, as he grew up, he battled through his struggles at school and came out with some respectable grades. Then he got a decent job, and in time even started his own business. It did well – very well. And he was proud of all he had achieved. Bradley had always been a kind-hearted lad and had never done anyone any harm. He had a strong sense of right and wrong. But he was searching for more. One day, he came across a noted spiritual teacher and asked him what he should do. The response shocked him. "Give up your business," he answered. "Put aside everything you've worked for and give it all away – every last penny." What should he do? Well, if you are anything like me, you probably think that Bradley would be *crazy* to give up all that he had worked for on the word of a spiritual teacher whom he hardly knew. It's far too big a sacrifice, and far too big a risk.

You will, I imagine, recognise Bradley in the man who approaches Jesus in today's Gospel. Now here's a strange thing. When I think of Bradley, I feel strongly that he should hang on to what he has worked for. But when I read today's Gospel, I find myself urging the man to accept what Jesus says, willing him to take the leap of faith. Perhaps you feel the same. I see him faced with a choice, a moment of decision in which he can receive everything that Jesus has to offer. And when he walks away, I feel sorry for him: he has lost his opportunity and has missed out on the chance to walk with Jesus. Bradley and the man in the Gospel are basically the same person. How can I look at Bradley and say, "Don't do it", and yet find myself willing the man in the Gospel to give up everything and follow the Lord?

I think the answer is probably quite simple. When I think of Bradley, I see what he is giving up; when I think of the man in the Gospel, I think of what he is missing out on if he doesn't follow Jesus. And there is something important here for all of us. Jesus does sometimes ask us to give things up. It may not be money and possessions, though it could be; and for some walks of life in the Church that's exactly the sacrifice that must be made. But it could also be our time, given for prayer or given in loving service of others; it could be giving up something of our ego in order to keep the peace or to promote unity in our families, society or the Church; it could be giving up some sinful habit which brings us passing comfort or pleasure. There are many things we might be asked to give up. And when we face these, our instinct kicks in and says, "No!" We are like Bradley: we see what we will miss out on. But the Lord is never outdone in generosity: when He asks us to give something up, He always gives more. "There is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, father, children or land who will not be repaid a hundred times over", He tells us. And so the real question is not: "What does Jesus want me to give up"; rather, we should always ask, "What does Jesus want to give me?" Often we lack faith, or we forget, that He really does want to shower gifts on us. He takes nothing from us, except so that He can give more in return.

There is a very striking and beautiful line in the Gospel today, when we're told that Jesus "looked steadily" at the man "and loved him." Love always gives; it does not take. Jesus is burning with desire to give this man gifts beyond what he can imagine, but first he needs to let go of what he has: to empty his hands, so that Jesus may fill them. Before telling him to give away all his property, Jesus doesn't say to him, "You have too much." Instead, He says, "There is one thing you lack." Jesus wants only to give.

You may remember that last week's Gospel ended with Jesus telling us that we had to welcome the Kingdom of God like little children. It is the only way to enter it, He taught. To be a child is to be dependent, to rely on others, not on our own resources. It means to receive more than we give. Today's story follows immediately after this teaching, and the man in the Gospel seems to follow a very different path. He can rely on his own wealth and status, even on his own holiness: he has kept all the commandments from his earliest days. He is, undoubtedly, a good man. But he is not a child before God: he does not know how to depend on the Lord. He wants to achieve eternal life by earning it – "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" But the life of God is a gift: it cannot be earned, it can only be received. That's why it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God: because a rich man does not know how to be a child, and only those who are children before God can enter His Kingdom.

So my suggestion, in the light of today's Gospel, is this: let's not ask ourselves today, "What does God want me to give up?" There are probably many things! Instead, let's ask God: "Lord, what do You want to give me? Show me Your gifts, give me a sense of just how much You are offering." Let's recognise that He looks steadily at us and loves us, and, in His love, He desires only to give. If we truly believe this, we will find it easy to let go of all that holds us back. We will learn how to empty ourselves so that we can be filled by Him. We will learn how to depend on Him, so as to truly live as His children, and – in this way – enter into His Kingdom of love and life.

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