

Homily: Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C) 2022

This week I heard a story about St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. As a young man he studied in Paris; by this time he had already come to a deep faith in Christ and had a strong desire to do the Lord's will. He was not wealthy, but had a small pot of money which he used to pay for his food and lodgings, which he shared with a couple of friends. Then, one day, one of his friends disappeared without trace, and shortly afterwards Ignatius discovered that his small pot of money had also disappeared without trace. Betrayed by his friend's theft, he was left destitute and had to live for a time in a refuge for the homeless. Not too long after the incident, he received a letter from his former friend, who told Ignatius that he had fallen ill and needed help. We can probably imagine what our instinctive reaction would be if we were in Ignatius' shoes. But this saint in the making set off in search of his friend, walking around a hundred miles to reach him; and more than that, as he walked he also fasted and prayed for his friend's recovery. On arrival, Ignatius nursed him back to health and helped him get on with his life.

Ignatius' response to this man's need is a great example of the teaching of Jesus in today's Gospel. The Lord says to us, "Love enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly." This is definitely not our instinct! Imagine how different we would look from everyone else in the world if we really lived this all the time. Imagine what a powerful sign we would be of God's love in our world. But it's hard to live like this. So hard, in fact, that we wonder: how could anyone do it? How did Ignatius do it? It's hard because it involves a kind of dying to self. We feel that some part of us will die if we let go of hurts and give beyond what seems reasonable. My ego has to die a little in order that I may see the other more clearly. So sometimes it seems impossible to let go of a hatred or resentment or to give of ourselves beyond a certain limit. How could we possibly live as Jesus teaches?

We get a clue – more than a clue – of the answer to this question in today's second reading. St Paul speaks of the two Adams: the first is the man in the Garden of Eden (as in, Adam and Eve); the second Adam is Christ. Paul teaches that the first became a living soul: he was given life by God; but the second is not simply a living soul, but a life-giving spirit. The first has physical life and is of the earth; the second, Christ, is the one who gives His own Spirit after the Resurrection to those who will receive it. They – we – are called to live those who live a new and spiritual life, bearing in ourselves the image of heaven, not the image of earth. Paul speaks about us being "modelled on the heavenly man" – Jesus. We see this Spirit of Jesus at work on the cross, especially when He prays, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." This Spirit which enables Him to love in this moment is the same Spirit which allows Him to defeat death and rise to new life at Easter.

There is in all of us a natural 'spirit', so to speak, a human spirit, which looks to our survival and the pursuit of our happiness. In themselves, there is nothing wrong with these (God also wants us to survive and be happy); but sometimes this human instinct leads us to places that make us unhappy (anger, bitterness, selfishness and so on). The Spirit of Christ sometimes leads us on paths which seem harder, but ultimately it offers us life. To be a

Christian is to be guided by this Spirit, not the spirit of our instincts or of the world's normal way of doing things.

This new Spirit, the Spirit of Christ alive in us, overcomes death. It overcomes our final death (the physical death which awaits us at the end of this life) and calls us to eternity; but it also overcomes the little 'deaths' – the times when we must let go of a grudge, or give beyond what we want to. When we are able to do some of these things, to live in this way, it is a sign of the Spirit of Christ alive in us; that Spirit which leads us to eternal life. This Spirit of Christ is a Spirit of love: love which overcomes selfishness, forgives wrongs, finds kindness even towards enemies, and ultimately draws us to eternal life – love which, simply put, is stronger than death.

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