

## Homily: Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C) 2022

This week, I came across an advert for apprenticeships which had the slogan “Earn as you learn”. It struck me as a clever slogan – it reminds us that an apprenticeship is really looking towards a future career, but also allows someone to earn a little money now. And more than that, apprentices also contribute as they learn, carrying out some of the tasks that will eventually become part of their everyday job.

Why am I talking about apprenticeships today? Because there is a line in the Gospel which reminds me that we are “apprentices” of Jesus. This is what it means to be a disciple. An apprentice works closely alongside someone who is fully qualified and skilled in their role, and in this way they learn. It’s the same for disciples of Jesus. We live alongside Him, the One who is perfect love. By observing Him and by practising His way of life, we become a little more like Him. We learn on the job, so to speak. Today Jesus tells us, “The fully trained disciple will always be like his teacher.” When we are fully trained, so to speak, we will be perfectly like Him. In the meantime, we are His disciples, His apprentices in faith and in love.

Today’s Gospel includes two specific warnings against things which stifle our discipleship. The first is judging others. The Lord uses this famous and slightly comical image of trying to remove the splinter from our neighbour’s eye whilst having a plank stuck in our own. He is pointing out how quickly we notice the faults of others and judge them, rather than taking a good look at ourselves and trying to put aside our own faults first. This hinders our discipleship, because we lack the love of Christ for others. But more than that, if I am spending all my time looking at my neighbours’ faults, noticing how one person is lazy and another gossips too much, or whatever it might be; then I am looking at what is negative in them, rather than what is beautiful in Christ. To be an apprentice we need to watch the Master at work. It’s a sign of our fallen human nature that we often notice more readily the faults of others than we observe the goodness of God. But when I am looking at what is wrong in others, I have taken my eyes off Christ. I am being dragged down by their faults rather than being raised up by His perfect love. The second thing the Lord warns us about is our words. “A man’s words flow out of what fills his heart”, the Lord tells us. If my speech is negative, destructive or uncharitable, then I need to invite the Lord more fully into my heart, because that is where the real fault lies.

How do we learn from Jesus? How do we become like Him? We use the simple methods and gifts He has given us. Firstly, prayer, and especially prayerful listening. It’s always fine for us to bring our needs to the Lord, but prayer must be wider than this. As well as asking, we must learn to listen, to sit at His feet and hear Him speak to us. Many times in the Gospel we hear the words, “Jesus said to His disciples”. This does not mean only those who lived 2000 years ago; it also means us! He speaks to us today, and if we are to grow in His likeness, we must learn to listen to His voice. The second thing I think of is the sacraments. These beautiful encounters with Christ allow us to become more like Him. In the Eucharist, we receive Christ to become Christ. “You are what you eat”, as the saying goes. If we receive Him with real faith, we grow in His likeness. In baptism, confirmation, ordination

and the sacrament of the sick, we are anointed with oil. The word 'Christ' means 'Anointed one'. In the sacraments we are reminded that we are called to be 'anointed ones', Christ-like, and we are given strength to help us change. A third way is by noticing the Lord's presence and action in our lives. Sometimes we are forgetful of Him, but when we live with an awareness of His closeness, we begin to grow in His likeness. The final way I suggest is a little harder, but can be very fruitful. When we experience suffering in our lives, we can respond to it as Jesus responded, accepting in love what we cannot change and offering it to God without bitterness or resentment. This can be extremely hard, but it is a massive opportunity for growth in the likeness of Christ.

We are about to enter the great season of Lent, a time of prayer, fasting, almsgiving and resisting temptation. Next week we will hear the story of Jesus being tempted in the desert. On Friday my sister told me that her two children, Thomas and Victoria, were at Mass a few years ago when this Gospel was read. Victoria was about two years old at the time, and Thomas six. At the children's liturgy, the leader asked, "Who tempted Jesus in the desert?" Victoria answered, "Thomas"! Next week we will hear the real answer, which is (thankfully) not my nephew! Hearing of Jesus in the desert next week, we are reminded of what He did: He spent 40 days praying, fasting and resisting temptation, choosing what is right. This is exactly what we do in Lent: we spend 40 days praying, fasting, and choosing what is good over all forms of evil. Perhaps Lent is such a fruitful time because it's the season when we most obviously walk in the footsteps of Jesus, really living our apprenticeship.

To be like Jesus we need to know Him, and we can only do this if we spend time with Him. We try to live alongside Him and let Him live alongside us. To become more and more Christlike: this is our apprenticeship. This is what it means to be a disciple, a Christian. I come back to where I started. In an apprenticeship, you earn as you learn. You contribute as you learn. In our Christian apprenticeship, it's true that we always have one eye on the end goal: heaven. Only then will we be fully 'qualified', fully like Christ. But in the meantime, as we learn, we contribute to our world, allow the goodness of God to flow through us. And, of course, we also earn, because by living alongside Jesus and trying to model ourselves on Him, we receive the great blessing of His grace and His friendship.

Fr Andrew

