

Homily for 26 (B) 2018

“Anyone who is not against us is for us.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The human instinct for self-assertion is fundamental to our survival and, alas, a key component in all those negative impulses that keep human beings apart. Take politics, for example. In recent years most politicians of every stripe seem to have completely deserted principle to embrace a naked struggle for power. Political leaders will say and do anything to get to the top. They will chase the political oxygen. The result has been a race to the bottom and the encouragement of some of the most negative human instincts and forms of behaviour in society. Populism is on the rise, and not just on the European continent. The French, keen observers of life, have, as so often, an expression for it. Un panier de crabes – a basket of crabs. (Explain). But it’s not just in the sphere of politics. We do not, apparently, care for rivals. Human ambition and jealousy so often get in the way of what we try to do, even in the most exalted spheres of life, and the life of faith appears to be no exception.

Then said Joshua, ‘My Lord Moses, stop them!’ Moses answered him, ‘Are you jealous on my account? If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets, and the Lord gave his spirit to them all!’

Jesus said, in similar circumstances, ‘You must not stop him: no one who works a miracle in my name is likely to speak evil of me.’

We need to be a little less resentful of competition on our own patch, and a little more ready to see God’s work for what it is, without letting our own prejudices and petty ambitions get in the way.

In John’s gospel we read:

‘The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit.’

A passage which I have always read as inviting us to a certain humility in the application of where we think the work of the Spirit is to be found. Our own opinions are often fallible at best, and readily skewed by self-interest.

Now, if Jesus criticizes those who are reluctant to see God working outside the inner group, he roundly condemns those who bring down those who have faith. This is worse than not seeing God working because of self-obsession, this is frankly opposing God's work. The Lord says of such people that it would be better for them if they were thrown into the sea with a millstone around their necks than face the terrible judgement awaiting them – a severity which he goes on to extend to the obstacles within ourselves to faith:

And if your hand should cause you to sin, cut it off...

The Lord is, as ever, in rhetorical vein, but what he is saying is that nothing, not even the most intimate aspects of the human person and personality must come between us and our focus upon God.

How do we do that? How do we confused and multipolar human beings get out of our selfish perspectives on life and bring ourselves home to the Father, keeping company with the Son, in the power of the Spirit. Well, we turn away from self and turn to God in the way he has given us – penitence and thanksgiving. Every time we celebrate the eucharist – the word means ‘thank you’ – we give thanks for all that the Father has done for us. A harvest thanksgiving is a simple thing – a turning to God in thankfulness for the food we eat and for the drink that we drink; giving thanks for the clothes on our backs and the homes in which we live; understanding the need to share these gifts and support those in need. But this very simple saying ‘thank you’ which any child can understand is embraced in that bigger thanksgiving which is our primary expression of faith. Sunday after Sunday, we not only say ‘thank you’ for the fact that Jesus has saved us by opening up the way to the Father, we also lift up all that we are to the Father with joy and holy fear. Our hearts are changed by that thanksgiving; they are purified of self and healed of the self-obsession that perverts, degrades and kills. George Steiner, in his little book on Heidegger, describes the latter's work as a unity of thought, poetry and that, ‘highest act of mortal pride and celebration which is to give thanks’. He concludes, ‘there are meaner metaphors to live by.’ Well, in our faith, that unity of poetry, thought and little and big thanksgivings is no longer a metaphor – it is the very presence of God himself among his people, bringing a harvest of holiness and joy. Praise God for a good harvest!