SUNDAY AFTER THE EXALTATION OF THE CROSS St Mark 8:34-9:1

Today’s Gospel, which is so familiar to us, about the need for self-denial and taking up the cross brings us to the heart of the purpose of the spiritual life on earth: namely the need to practise ‘ascesis’, a word which means ‘training’ or ‘spiritual struggle’. In this action, or rather activity, because it is an ongoing process, we are replicating the fundamental action of God towards mankind. This came in the Epistle from St Paul’s letter to the Philippians read at our recent liturgy here for the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God: “Christ emptied himself taking the form of a servant.” And we rejoiced in the fact that the Mother of God had been given this same vocation of serving mankind in a unique way too. How coincidental that we are currently being treated by the media to the many ways in her life in which our newly departed Queen served her people and mankind from the moment she made her vow at her coronation in 1953. We are told that in order to gain life we must lose life (not always literally, fortunately) and that to save ourselves we must give ourselves away. There are various pitfalls and dangers here which must be identified at the outset. The act of self-denial must be carefully counterbalanced by what we justly and reasonably owe ourselves as human beings, or self-love as the commandment calls it. What is striking in our society today is the psychological polarisation which we see in ourselves. A new phrase, ‘low self-esteem’, has appeared, where often because of his or her experience in childhood or elsewhere, a person considers himself inadequate, inferior and worthless at the deepest level and often abuses himself. This may happen in the rut of unemployment or at a similar crisis point but always infects a person with the inability to exploit the unique, God-given talents which can fulfil him or her and give glory to God. Conversely, we are used to the process everywhere around us and fed by the media of making gods of people or gurus, whether it is in the world of politics, music, business or football, which creates bloated egotists trapped in the world of themselves. Particularly today, for whatever reason, these poles seem to be getting further apart. But Christianity counsels a true and honest opinion of oneself - a ‘know thyself’ philosophy - which gives an objective, balanced and correct assessment of one’s own strengths and weaknesses, which acts as a real and firm foundation for any spiritual effort or struggle. This is the ‘apatheia’ or distant objectivity of the Fathers, which can only flourish in the knowledge that all our talents are gifts of God given by his grace for the benefit of others and for our own salvation.

What we actually undertake in the work of self-denial is also extremely important and we must decide on this practically and soberly in consultation with a priest or spiritual guide. St Paul says in the context of giving but with a wider relevance, “Each of you must do as he has made up his mind” and “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling”. This does not mean in isolation or apart from the Church. The act of self-denial is laid upon us because it leads to life, spiritual clarity or illumination, attention to one’s deeper spiritual and human needs and discernment of God’s will both communally and individually. Few of us come to Easter without a sense of relief that we can enjoy a good piece of meat, if we do not have the gift of living very comfortably without it, but also without a greater or lesser sadness that we are albeit temporarily leaving a period where we have enjoyed `god’s presence for however short a time in a new and meaningful way which deep down we know to be the home we are journeying towards and which our hearts long for.

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The Church’s rules about fasting are well known to us – no meat or animal products on Wednesdays and Fridays, unless there is a dispensation because of a feast etc, no food or drink for a minimum of six hours before communion and observation of the four fasts in a year. However, these rules are designed to cultivate in us a sense of love of self-denial, where the spirit overcomes the law and our hearts desire to serve God in a deeper, all consuming way because of our love for him. The rules are there to lead us to that state and they are not an end in themselves, as the Pharisees mistakenly thought. There are times when we damage ourselves if we do not realistically say, “I cannot do it”. The peasants in 19th century Russia were known for their misery and short-tempers in Great Lent – no reduction in the work load but a meat fast imposed on them. This kind of approach does not give glory to God. At the same time we should not make excuse for ourselves when we can push ourselves that bit further. Few of us fulfil the rules on fasting correctly and to the letter. In a sense we cannot, unless perhaps in a monastery, because the ability to do something like this or perform a spiritual feat or work or renounce something which chains us is the gift of God, which we cannot do in our own strength.

But there is another aspect of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross which we need to bear in mind. One of the adjectives which is applied to the Cross is that it is ‘life-giving’. St Paul in his letter to the Church at Ephesus, says that ‘when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, God in his mercy made us alive together with Christ and raised us up to sit with him in the heavenly places’. Now this refers to what Christ has accomplished for us by his death on the Cross but there is a present aspect to this power. You probably know the story of a young, zealous girl of a very evangelical background who is sitting in a railway compartment with a very distinguished bishop dressed in purple. Determined not to be put off by this august prelate she approaches him and asks, “Are you saved?” After a momentary silence he replies, “Do you mean ‘have been saved, are being saved or will be saved?” It is the ‘being saved’ which occupies our present ascetic struggle when we speak about its ‘life-giving’ power, though of course not to the exclusion of past and future. In the Old Testament is mentioned the bronze serpent in the desert which God gave to Moses to heal the bites of the deadly serpents. This cross which we undertake to carry in the footsteps of Christ has ‘life-giving’ or healing properties too. It is working in us to sanctify in some way which we might not see at present. This is a fact of the spiritual life to be borne in mind and to encourage us especially in painful, testing times.

So let us examine ourselves as accurately as we can with an awareness of our own strengths and weaknesses with neither a feeling of despair or over-confidence but with the reassurance of the life-giving power of the Cross in us to bring us to salvation. And let us realistically accept what we can and cannot offer God and above all pray that he will kindle in us a desire to serve him more and reveal those areas of our lives, great or small, where we can through denial allow him to enter to the glory of his name.

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