

Sunday after the Ascension B

12/05/24 John 17:11-19

Once there was a village with a chief who had three sons, each of which possessed a special talent. The oldest was skilled in his ability to raise and care for olive trees. The second was a shepherd, but when the sheep got sick, he possessed special abilities to make them well. The third son was a great dancer. When there was a string of bad luck in his family or in the village or if anyone needed some cheer added to their lives, he would dance and bring them joy. One day the father told his sons that he had to go on a long journey. He instructed them, "My sons, the people of the village will be depending on you to help them. Each of you has a special talent, so while I am gone, I expect you to use your gift wisely and well, so that upon my return I will find our village more happy and prosperous than it is today." He embraced his sons and then left on his journey. For a few months, things went quite well in the village, but then came the cold winter with its snow, winds, and assorted problems. First, the buds on the olive trees shrank and cracked and it would, therefore, be a long time before the trees would recover. The village, because of the extremely long winter, ran out of firewood, so the people began to cut down the trees and in the process stripped the village bare. Even though the first son did not want to see the trees cut down, he knew that the villagers needed heat to survive, and so he began to help them make firewood from the olive trees. Then the snow and ice made it impossible for traders to come up the river and negotiate the mountain passes. So the villagers said, "Let us kill the sheep and eat them so we will not starve to death." The village chief's second son refused for a time, but eventually gave in to the villagers demands. He said, "What good will it do to spare the sheep, only to have the villagers perish?" In this way, the villagers had just enough firewood for their fires and food for their tables. But the horrible winter had broken the peoples' spirit. They began to think that things were really much worse than they were and many began to lose hope. This belief was so strong that, family by family, they began to desert the village in search for a more hospitable environment.

As spring came, the icy grip of winter began to loosen and at the same time the chief of the village returned, to find smoke rising only from his own chimney. "What have you done?" he asked when he reached his village. "What has happened to the villagers?" "Oh, father, forgive me," said the eldest son. "The people were freezing and begged me to cut down the olive trees, and so I did. I gave away my talent. I am no longer fit to be an orchard keeper." "Don't be angry, father," said the second son. "The sheep would have frozen anyway, and the people were starving and thus I sent the herd to slaughter." The father understood and said, "Don't be ashamed my sons. You did the best you could, and acted rightly and humanely. You used your talents wisely in trying to save the people. But, tell me, what has become of them? Where are they?" The two brothers fixed their eyes on their younger brother who said, "Welcome home, father. Yes, it has been a hard winter. There was little to eat and little firewood for heat. I thought it would be insensitive and improper to dance during such suffering. Besides, I needed to conserve my strength so that I could dance for you when you came home." "Then dance, my son," said the father, "for the village is empty and so, too, my heart. Fill us with joy and courage once again. Yes, please dance!" But when the third son made ready to dance, he grimaced and fell down. His legs were so stiff and sore from sitting that they could no longer be used for dancing. The father

was so sad that he could not even be angry. He simply said to his youngest son, “Ours was a strong village that could have survived the want of fuel and food, but it could never survive without hope. And because you failed to use your talent wisely and well, our people gave up what little hope they had. So now what? The village is deserted and you are crippled. Your punishment has already fallen upon you.” With that he embraced his two elder sons and wept.

This powerful little story demonstrates what happens when we fail to use wisely the gifts and talents God gives us. In today’s Gospel, Jesus proclaims a beautiful prayer to his Father and reviews, one might say, the mission he engaged at the Father’s request. Christ knows that his time on this earth is very short and that he will soon return to the Father. Thus, he prays to God and expresses how he has done his best to complete the work he was sent to accomplish. From his personal experience, Jesus knew the world could be a very tough place and that is why he asks the Father to protect those for whom he knows. We all know that Jesus’ prayer was answered. Soon we will celebrate the great feast of Whitsunday and the birthday of the Church.

There is no doubt that Jesus did his work very well. He was the greatest of teachers, as seen so often in the scriptures. We recall how Jesus taught them that it is better to serve than be served, that humility was more important than power, and that there was an absolute need to sacrifice, even to die to self and live for others in order to find life eternal. Jesus, like the two elder sons in the story, used his talents well and wisely.

We, the contemporary disciples of Jesus, have been given many talents and gifts to be used for the construction of God’s kingdom. We have been sent to this world, individually and uniquely, to wisely and fully use the many and wonderful gifts we have been given. We have been given the gifts of teaching, speaking, and writing. Some of us have great physical prowess and others are great musicians and singers. Some of us are very good with numbers and ply our skill as engineers, scientists, and researchers. Some are carers and healers amongst many other things. There are a few who possess multiple talents.

If we were to review our lives, as Jesus does in John Chapter 17, would we be able to honestly say that we have used God’s gifts wisely and well for the benefit of all? Or have we been more like the younger son who squandered his gift of bringing hope and in the process lost his talent and devastated his village?

It is not always easy to use our gifts well, wisely, and for the betterment of all, and, thus, we often need the assistance of others. This we have, however, in the Community of faith, the Church. Many of us know from personal experience that sometimes utilising our gifts for the building of God’s kingdom will bring ridicule and rejection. But, this should not be a surprise, for any of us. Jesus told us that we would be hated by the world, but he reminded us as well that we must take courage for he has overcome the world.

Everybody knows that oysters sometimes make pearls. When an oyster—who must ordinarily have an enviably calm life lying around, eating soft, pleasant food—when an oyster somehow gets a piece of grit or a bit of sand inside its shell, then one of two things will happen: either the

oyster will create a pearl or it will die. The pearl, a thing of beauty and value—is the oyster’s way of staying alive after something very irritating has got past its shell and into its heart.

Take that little bit of marine biology as background, as we are offered a grain of sand, a bit of irritation, something small and rough that can maybe slip past our shells and give us something to work on. We—and indeed the Church itself, in this and every generation—need to work on this bit of sand very carefully. It will not go away, and we will either make of it a pearl, or, in one way or another, we will die.

The grit (like the oyster’s sand) is well hidden in pleasant, soft food. The Gospel we just heard is a portion of what is called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. The time is “the night in which he was betrayed.” Jesus is praying for his disciples—and for us. He prays for our unity, for our joy, and for our safety and protection. Jesus says that we are **not** of the world, but that we should nonetheless remain in the world—for our ministry is to be in the world, and for the world.

And Jesus says this about his disciples: that the world has hated them because they are not of the world. This hatred is to be the fate, indeed it is to be one real, distinguishing mark, of all who follow Jesus. Disciples are to stand out because they don’t really fit in.

The bit of grit for us oysters is this: When was the last time the world hated you because you belong to Jesus, and not to the world? When was the last time your faith so set you apart from business as usual that you were met with anger, ridicule, or hatred? How about a little bit of contempt? Mild dislike? How about a tiny bit of irritation? I have had plenty in 35 years of ministry.

Hey, maybe Jesus was wrong; maybe, these days, we all should be of the world, and that’s the way it’s supposed to be. Maybe the Kingdom of God has arrived, and we just missed most everything about it, except for how convenient it is for us. But probably not.

From time to time, we need to ask whether we have become so totally caught up in our culture, become so totally of the world, that we have to work hard to discover if we are different, and how we are different, and what it might look like for us to be different, and whether it’s worth the effort, and the cost, to be different.

In many ways, it was easier for the Early Church. As a generally ignored and occasionally but regularly persecuted minority in a pagan culture, a lot of things were clear; For example: Christians couldn’t attend the public games; they couldn’t hold public office, hold any of several types of jobs; they couldn’t join the army and so on. They were cannibals, low lives (literally in the catacombs of Rome) and subversive elements. Their culture, “the world”, often ridiculed them or made them scapegoats, and occasionally brutally killed and tortured them for fun, and both sides pretty much knew why.

One way we try to get out of this pinch can cause just as much trouble. That way is saying that it’s the Church’s job to fix the world so there will be no conflicts between our faith and our

culture for us to worry about. So, from time to time, we rear back and try to change everything within reach so we can be both righteous and of the world at the same time. Now, on one level, this is really good. We must engage the world, and we should try very hard to make things better—things like institutions, systems, people, and ourselves. We need to do this; our faith demands it. But we need to avoid getting confused about what that means. And we get confused very easily, very easily.

It's sometimes easy to forget that God will bring in the Kingdom, God will bring in the Kingdom! We won't. And, even worse, we also find it very easy and we are very good at beginning to support what we think is a good improvement/innovation in the world (for Christian reasons) but end up holding on to the improvement/innovation and forgetting the Christian part of it altogether. Think of our hospitals, our schools, universities, aged care and welfare, of our Church? Of course, the best way to tell whether the cause or the Christianity is more important is by looking at how we treat people who don't agree with our improvement/innovation?

And we get confused when we forget that the Lord doesn't call us to be powerful or effective as the world sees power and effectiveness. The Lord calls us to be faithful—to live his life, to follow his steps. After all, of the twelve disciples, Judas was the most effective one at using both money and the powers-that-be to get what he wanted. So, trying to fix the world, while might be an important thing to do, isn't really the pearl we need. Isn't the pearl we need.

This side of the Kingdom, the world as Jesus spoke of it, the world as business as usual, this will always, in one way or another, be the opponent and adversary to faithfulness and not the means to it.

So, how do we do this? How do we live faithfully and honestly, rationally, prudently, and with integrity, in the midst of a world that is really quite far from the Kingdom? Taking this challenge seriously amounts to some of the most important pearl-making work the Church has on its agenda. It's really the question of how we are to live and be. In effect we need to ask the question: In what or where or whom do we abide? God or Mammon?

And we need to make these pearls, or we will die. We need to look honestly at “the world”, the culture and institutions around us, and at who we are—and then pay careful attention to, and take concrete steps toward becoming, the person and the Church the Lord would have us to be. Much of John's Gospel says we need to abide in God's love first and foremost—to rightly put the horse before the cart. Championing this cause or that cause is not where we should be centred- but in the abiding love of God. From that centre good things can come. Then we will discover that Jesus was absolutely right, and that, in one way or another, the world will hate, or at least misunderstand, us. What is for sure is that we know that the Lord continues to pray for us and that we are promised all of the help we need, and these pearls will come, but from the least likely and unpredictable and from the oddest of places.

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