

God Loves a Cheerful Giver

A Pastoral Letter for the Year of Vocation 2008-2009.

I

What is the Lord saying to me now ? Whether single, married, priest or Religious, this is a question that this year of vocation prompts us to ask. Jesus points us towards an answer in one of the shortest of his parables. He says, *The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid, then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field.* (Matthew 13:44). Three key words here - *find, sell, buy* – go right to the heart of what Christian life is about.

Find

We often use the word gifted to describe exceptional talent in someone. We refer to gifted writers, gifted musicians, gifted communicators. In fact, the word gifted basically means someone who has received much. In that sense we are all gifted for we have been given much by God (gifts of life, faith, health, friends and much more). Our faith invites us to notice, to identify and to name God's many blessings, to be thankful for them. At its best a life of faith is a life of gratitude where we never cease to be amazed at the myriad ways in which God blesses us. His love continues to be inventive.

Every gift reminds us of the giver of that gift. The more we appreciate the giver the more we are likely to understand and appreciate the gift. When Jesus spoke about finding the treasure there is no doubt about what he had in mind. His relationship with his Father filled him with joy and with energy for his mission. That relationship of communion, of unity, is the key to understanding his life, it makes sense of everything he said and did. The treasure he wants us to find is that of a deep friendship with God, trust in a loving Father who sees us with joy, loves to surprise us with his gifts, and gives the very best to those who leave the choice to him. Through his gifts God wants us to grow and become more like him, become more compassionate, more life-giving. If we are to reach maturity in faith then we need to be attentive to his gifts, ready to be surprised and led into ways we might not choose to go. His word to Israel is for us too, *all along the road I carried you until you came to this place* (Deuteronomy 1:31). He has been carrying us whether we have noticed or not. Our finest response is to become more and more alert to that personal care for us on our journey, to meet him in the story of our lives. Each of us has a different story, a unique experience of God's love and care. When we have come to know and find joy in his love then we have found the treasure that Jesus spoke of in his parable. That insight gives us an anchor of security, however life may surprise us. When our foundations are secure then we find it easier to cope with the insecurity that is part of

every life. Only when we rest in God do we find the space and freedom to be all that we are and more than we are, be the best we can be.

Sell

Letting go is at the heart of life, but it comes at personal cost. Forgiveness involves a letting go and a learning from what happened so that what caused the hurt in the first place is not repeated. To fully engage with the present requires a letting go of yesterday. If we learn to own and integrate the pain points of the past we don't need to carry them into the present. If we don't manage to leave them behind us in a healthy way then we carry painful baggage with us. In our time the most difficult letting go is often that of making priorities, making firm decisions that give a clear direction to our living. Every decision involves a 'yes' and a 'no'. A 'yes' to priesthood is a 'no' to marriage. Decisions like that require acceptance of limitations. Such decisions do not come easily in a culture that likes to keep as many options as possible open. We have commitments, maybe work commitments in several places, which make claims on our time and energy. People have claims on us, drawing on our skills, our time and support. Our faith commitments make claims on us too. The wisdom of the gospel asks us to put the claims of God first, those of people second and those of things third. Making and keeping our priorities in correct order does cost us. Commitment usually does ask more of us than we expected. In his parable Jesus says that the one who has found the treasure goes off and sells with joy. To say 'yes' with joy to what the Lord gives and asks, this is one of the great challenges of Christian life. The wisdom of experience teaches us that where the treasure has been found then letting go is possible and even joyful, but where the treasure has not been found then letting go is a price some find themselves unable to pay. If we are sure that a loving God is with us then it is easier to make long-term commitments and trust that he will be there for us into the future.

Buy, Invest

Jesus said that he came to bring peace. Letting go, letting God be God, gave Jesus the freedom to live a life of obedience, of service, of humility. He invested his time and energy in building bridges of reconciliation and peace at every level. Every vocation is a call to love as he loved, to live as he did, to build peace as he built it. It is an invitation to live life in depth, to see it not just as a journey from one place or event to another, but as a pilgrimage, a sacred journey in which God is actively involved. To see life as a vocation is to live in depth, to see with eyes of faith and respond to the Lord in all of it. To invest in the treasure we have found is to keep an eye on the bigger picture and never forget the long-term view. Jesus invested his energy in living love to the end. Three outstanding qualities of that love were particularly evident; his love was compassionate, faithful and universal. His compassion was shown in his reverence for people as he found them, but also in the ways he drew them to become the very best they could be. His love was faithful. It did not depend on the good or bad behaviour of others. He remained true to himself, to the mission his Father gave him, whether people responded well or badly. His love was universal, that is open to all. None were excluded, no one was considered

unworthy. To live love as Jesus lived it is both a challenge and a privilege for every Christian. It is to find, sell and invest as he did.

II

Feed my Sheep

The Year of Vocation began on what we call Good Shepherd Sunday which is the Fourth Sunday after Easter and will end on Good Shepherd Sunday, May 3rd, 2009. On Good Shepherd Sunday Jesus, the good shepherd, is offered to us as the model for the living of every Christian vocation. Reflecting on our own individual experience of people who have been shepherds for us helps to understand what is involved in becoming shepherds for others. When we are growing up we need people to care for us, to advise us when we don't know the way, to help us recover from our mistakes, to heal our hurts and help us to move on in a way that allows the past to bless us. When we are vulnerable we need shepherds that we can lean on for support. Their care and their strength enable us in our turn to become shepherds for others. We begin to be shepherds when we recognize that we have a responsibility for our brothers and sisters. When we show care, share our wisdom, forgive their mistakes, respect their dignity, we show the face of God to them, we help them to grow and become shepherds in their turn. From Jesus we learn what it means to be the good shepherds he wants us to be.

In his time the shepherd had three main tasks – to lead, to find pasture, to protect.

Lead

Growing up in Palestine Jesus was very familiar with the custom of shepherds to walk ahead of their flocks. Each sheep had a name, was known by name and felt secure in the presence of the shepherd. The shepherd knew the way, led the way, and guided his flock to where they would find good pasture and water to quench their thirst. Jesus availed of that image to explain the nature of his care. He had a clear vision, *I came that they might have life, and have it to the full* (John 10:10). God is a God of life. Jesus wanted his hearers to become fully alive through their relationship with this life-giving God. To lead people to where they would be most receptive to the gifts of God, this was Jesus' aim. He did not settle for telling his listeners the different pathways to God, he showed them the way by how he lived. As shepherd his leadership was outstanding for its vision, for its personal care for each individual person. He passionately longed for the unity of his flock. Half truths divide and confuse. The truth sets free and it unites. When people fail to find that which truly nourishes they become frustrated. Jesus offered the truth to nourish integrity and peace. He gave the Eucharist so that the deep hungers there are in each of us for worth, for reconciliation, for hope, for a mission in life, would be satisfied. We, his flock, are entrusted with the privilege of leading others to him so that they may find in him the life that truly nourishes and brings fulfilment.

Nourish

The reality of our calling to be shepherds is at times stark. We sometimes feel we are offering humble food to a not so humble culture that does not know it is hungry. Compared to the promises of security, of celebrity status, of control that a world of prosperity and competition offers, our food can seem very inadequate. Our frailties and limitations are apparent with stunning clarity. We face the same dilemma as the disciples of Jesus when they realized that they had no food to feed the multitude. We often long to be able to offer something that is both appealing and nourishing so that we don't lose people to the attractive promises of the secular values of instant gratification and aggressive individualism. We can feel angry at those who are willing to come and eat only if we serve what they like. We can blame the competition, the forces of consumerism that create hunger for what they serve rather than serve what will fill the real hunger in people. We'd like to offer enticing food to satisfy the hungers we know are there. What we can offer is the Word of God and the Bread of Life. That is what Jesus offered. Opening up the riches in the Word of God and in the gift of the Eucharist, this is our challenge. The few loaves and fish were enough in Jesus' time to meet the hungers of the multitude. We need the humility to understand that they are still more than enough. Rather than consider our loaves and fish as stale and unappealing we need faith in what we have, the courage to offer it with the Lord and let him satisfy the hungers in us and around us.

Protect

There's an old story about a man who was asked how he was faring in life. *It's a struggle*, he replied. *It's like this, it's as if there were two wolves fighting inside me. And which of them will win*, the questioner asked. *The one that is fed*, he replied. If evil is supported it will prevail, but if the good is nourished, it will win out. Jesus protects us by nourishing our inner strength, our convictions, our commitments, our sense of identity. Strengthening the good weakens the power of evil. His care protects in the way that all caring relationships protect. Every shepherd has great potential to be a protective presence. If we speak positively of the Church this gives people strength to live their commitments as members of the Church community. When we speak well of marriage as a wonderful vocation, this supports married people in living of the promises they have made. Noticing and acknowledging the immense contribution some of our single people make confirms them in their calling and encourages them to continue in generosity. Speaking constructively about priesthood and Religious Life encourages young people to see the value of commitment in the service of the Lord as priests and Religious. If we are fearful about the future we ought not be surprised if young people become fearful. If we think that Religious Life and priesthood are a waste of a good life then we should not be taken aback if young people come to the same conclusion. Each one of us has the capacity to nurture the good and so ensure that it will win out. When we encourage the different vocations within the Christian community we are strengthening our brothers and sisters in their commitments.

Conclusion

St. Augustine said that where there is love there is no toil because the toil is loved. It is a privilege to serve the Lord and his Church in any capacity. Different vocations means that there are many forms of service. That service starts by listening to God and to his caring presence in our story. Seeing and listening in faith will lead to gratitude and to joy in God's love that has been and still is very active on our behalf. He first gives much, then asks, and when he asks it is always for our good, though we may not see that at first. His desire is that we find joy in his blessings and in joy want to share them. Joy in receiving leads to joy in giving. Thus we become cheerful givers. It is towards that ideal that we travel together in faith.

Prayer

God our Father, into a world disfigured by sin you sent your Son that in him we might see the beauty of your care for us as we travel our pilgrim journey. Give us eyes of faith so that we may be alert to your love at work for us in every event of life. May we grow in wonder at your love that heals, that forgives, that strengthens, that consoles, that guides us into the way of peace. Let us grow in gratitude for the shepherds you give us, for those who are leaders by the good they do, for those who understand our thirst to grow, for those who take away our hearts of stone when life is difficult, for those who help us find peace. May the care and goodness we have known mould us into shepherds with caring hearts for those in need of support and inner strength. May we always have good shepherds who know the way to you, who show us the way to you, who make the gospel attractive by the way they live. May the different vocations and the different gifts truly enrich us. May those who are single, married, priests and Religious, find fulfilment in living for you and build up the unity of your Church through their service as cheerful givers.