15th Sunday in O.T. 2021

This world of ours is a battlefield. That is so in lands ravished by warfare, such as Afghanistan. But there are also cultural battles being waged between conflicting visions of what it means to be human. Here in Ireland, and in much of the Western World, the struggle is between the vision of a world with God at its centre, and a secular world view in which humanity alone is the measure of truth and values.

You and I are caught up in this struggle, because, as Christian men and women, we are called to witness to the reality and beauty of our faith in Jesus Christ,. This faith guides us towards an authentic humanism, a humanism that acknowledges that God *“formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”* (*Gen.2:7).* The Second Vatican Council states rather succinctly, “closing our eyes to God blinds us to our neighbour” *(cf GS 36);* the reverse is equally true, because closing our eyes to our neighbour, blinds us to God!

We could, of course, look at our world and see an unredeemable mess and decide that we can do nothing about it. – but that would not be the Christian response since we have a Christ-given mission to the world. Every generation is like a new continent to be conquered for Christ *(Cf St Pope John Paul 11, Ireland*). He calls us to himself, just as he called the Apostles, and as he sent the Apostles out to conquer their generation for him, so does he send us to conquer our generation. You may be thinking that this is a tall order and completely unrealistic, but if that is so, how then are we to understand the words of Jesus addressed to us in today's Gospel passage?

Perhaps the first question we must ask is “Are these words of Jesus in this Gospel passage intended for us?”. Jesus makes some extraordinary demands, *“take nothing for the journey except a staff - no bread, no haversack, no coppers... 'Do not take a spare tunic.'”* Undoubtedly, he was speaking specifically to the Apostles, in their particular situation and environment; but he was also under scoring the urgency of the task in hand. We, however, are not in the same situation, and we also have very real, if different, responsibilities towards others - there are families to be cared for, children to be educated, sick to be looked after and the elderly supported, all of which entail work and earning a living. But although we cannot respond to Jesus exactly as his Apostles did, neither can we simply set aside his instructions as irrelevant for us. After all, we recognise the urgent need in our society for the fresh and liberating authentic humanism of the Gospel. So, what are we to do?

We must begin by understanding and accepting that each one of us is a chosen child of God, and loved as such; St. Paul reminds us in the second reading that we are, *“claimed as God's own, chosen from the beginning”*. What is it then that we are chosen to do? These extraordinary words from the Gospel seem to sum up the task Jesus has in mind, *“preach repentance; cast out devils; anoint sick people and cure them”*.

While it is true that we are not free to drop everything in the same radical way that the Apostles did, nevertheless, our being here this morning surely indicates a desire to do what Jesus asks? But how are we to go about it? How are we to preach repentance for example? If we are do so we should keep the following in mind: repentance is not merely about stirring up sorrow for particular sins and failures; it is more radical than that, much more life changing! Emphatically it is about judging others. Rather it is about me changing my entire outlook on life; it is about living with the conviction that to be truly human is to live a life turned towards God – and in this way to challenge the superficiality of secularism. Such a life eloquently preaches the message of Christ.

The challenge to cast out devils and overcome evil spirits sounds rather daunting. But Jesus isn’t asking us to become, in some dramatic sense, exorcists! What he desires is for us to stand firm against all wrongdoing and to bring his spirit into every situation that we encounter. St Paul describes that spirit as, *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* The Lord has chosen us to continue the battle against evil, by patiently persevering in the struggle to make the world around us a better and a more loving place.

When he asks us to anoint the sick, Jesus includes not only those physically ill, but the lonely, the excluded, the lost, indeed everyone around us, using the anointing oil of love, understanding, and encouragement. May everyone who comes into this parish church feel anointed with “welcome”! Pope Francis defines a parish as “a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey” *(EG 28)*. Everyone we come into contact with “needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love” *(EG 44),* so no judging; no harsh words; no rejection; but a pouring on all the healing balm of love.

*“Lord God,*

*may your Holy Spirit help us to understand*

*that all your paths are love and truth”.* **Amen**