21st Sunday in O.T. 2025

Not all roads lead to God! That is the important point which Jesus makes in today’s Gospel passage. This assertion is also related to the central message found in today’s second reading: God, like a good parent, seeks, throughout our lives, to keep us on “the straight and narrow”. That is why the reading says, *“the Lord trains the one that he loves”.*

Someone has said that “raising kids is part joy and part guerrilla warfare!” – while that is somewhat of an exaggeration, nevertheless, those who claim to be experts on child rearing offer an extraordinary range of diverse opinions as to how to go about the task. But all agree that the form of physical correction, common in former times, is to be rejected. Society has moved a long way from the view “spare the rod, spoil the child”.

Yet, we acknowledge that allowing the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction is not the answer either - children need to learn the boundaries. Pope Francis, in a document on family life, said, “Good habits need to be developed.... (children) need to be trained to say, “Please”, “Thank-you”, and “Sorry” *(cf LA 266).*  It is essential to help them realise that misbehaviour has consequences. *(cf LA 268).* Of course, the exercise of appropriate discipline, within the home, varies from family to family, but there is one constant, that is, loving care. “Parents....are responsible, by their affection and example, for instilling in their children trust and loving respect. *(cf LA 263)*

As is so often the case, what is true in everyday life, is also true in our relationship with God. Again, Pope Francis writes, “All of us should be able to say, thanks to the experience of our life in the family: “*We have come to believe in the love that God has for us.”*” *(1Jn.4:16) ( LA 290).*  This is the essential point that our second reading, from the letter to the Hebrews, is making – God treats us as a wise parent would! We are God’s beloved children loving and caring, which includes teaching and correcting, God treats us as his beloved - we are neither ignored, nor are we indulged and spoiled. We who profess Christian faith, we are to live that faith with maturity, realising that that our choices matter, and that our actions have consequences.

In our relationship with God, we too need to learn to say, “Please”, “Thank-you”, and “Sorry”. These three simple concepts are key to a mature understanding of our faith; "please" the key sentiment in our intercession; "thank-you" the key attitude as we recall God's many blessings; "sorry" the key perspective as we reflect on how we love God and our neighbour.

By claiming that God loves them just as they are, some may convince themselves that they are all right as they are, - but that argument doesn't work! Regularly in discussions concerning the complexities of modern life, the question arises, “What would Jesus do?”. Often it is not intended so much as a question, but as an answer, an answer which frequently misrepresents the compassion of Jesus. But we know only too well what Jesus would do, we see it in the Gospels, and hear it from his own lips. He would indeed be compassionate, but he would also be challenging. Never, ever did he say to those he encountered, “You are all right as you are!” His love reached out to them where they were, but that love refused to allow them to stay as they were. Love always desires what is best for the beloved – but it does not absolve us from responsibility for our decisions and actions.

God, like a loving parent, has ways of alerting us to the fact that we need to pause and to think; to turn round, and to go in a different direction; to get down on our knees and say sorry. Listen to what the author of the letter to the Hebrews says to us, *“when the Lord corrects you, do not treat it lightly; but do not get discouraged when he reprimands you. For the Lord trains the ones that he loves....”.* In the stillness of prayer, we hear the gentle, but strong and wise, voice of God, the voice of conscience. Cardinal Newman says that this voice is “not a mere sentiment, not a mere opinion, or impression, or view of things, but a law, an authoritative voice, bidding us to do certain things and to avoid others....it commands, it praises, it blames, it promises, it threatens, it implies a future, and it witnesses to the unseen” *(O.S.64).*

It is important that to heed Jesus’ warning that not all roads lead to heaven - nor will we stroll into heaven by chance. Christian living involves struggle, it requires energy and commitment; we must have a strong sense that our moral and spiritual choices really do matter. Jesus exhorts, *“Try your best to enter by the narrow door, because I tell you, many will try to enter and will not succeed.”*

*“Lord, make me know your ways.*

*Lord, teach me your paths.*

*Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:*

*for you are God my saviour.”* **Amen.**