

SUNDAY 30 OCTOBER 2022 – All Saints Sunday

Daniel 7.1-3, 15-18

Ephesians 1.11-end

Luke 6.20-31

I wonder if you have ever seen the mediaeval play “Everyman”. It was on at the National Theatre quite a few years ago. It concerns a rich man who was leading a selfish and dissolute life. One day he gets a visit from a character called Death, who tells him he has come from God to inform him that he must go on a journey from which he will not return and at the end of which he must give an account of his life to God. In panic he appeals to his family and friends to accompany him on this journey, but he has neglected them all in favour of riches and partying; finally he meets a character called Knowledge, often disguised as a homeless person, who explains the seriousness of the situation and says that he must prepare himself to meet God, which he does and confesses his life of neglect. It is something that only he can do. Plays like this were used in the time before the Reformation when the Bible was still in Latin, and sermons were not preached; the plays could reach large numbers of people in one fell swoop, and in a language they could understand.

In a way this sort of teaching, although it is not very subtle, brings home to people of all generations and centuries the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven or we might call it Eternal Life. In Christian terms it represents the life we are all intended to try and lead here on Earth, the life of looking outwards from ourselves towards both God and our neighbour. This reminds us of the story of the rich man who comes to Jesus asking “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”. Jesus quotes a number of commandments to him, and he replies that he keeps all of them. The implication here is that Jesus knows that the man really does keep these commandments in terms of knowing what they mean, but that he doesn’t

put them all into practice, being preoccupied by his possessions. He goes away in shock and disappointment.

And we too would react in a similar way, wouldn't we, if someone told us to give away everything we have to the poor or to other good causes. In fact we would react in the same way as the disciples do after the rich man has gone: is there no hope for those lucky or skilful enough to have money and property ?

Yet we are all called to be saints, as today's readings make clear, and particularly the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels. This calling to be saints encompasses not only those who have been declared saints by the Church, including of course most recently our countryman St John Newman. We are all called to try and behave like saints, to use the gifts and talents God gives us for the benefit of all. Remember Jesus's phrase "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God". The disciples were astounded when they heard this, and might even have giggled at the idea if the subject matter were not so serious. However it is fairly certain that this phrase of Jesus would have meant something to his listeners. One of the gates into Jerusalem was known as the Narrow Gate; travellers arriving at that gate with pack animals would need to stop and unburden their animals before being able to proceed through the gate. Jesus refers in other places to the difficulty of those wanting to follow him in getting through this "Narrow Gate". In other words if we are serious about practising the Christian life, we will need like Everyman to get rid of those things which distract us, in order to concentrate on our relationship with God and our neighbours, whoever and wherever they may be.

The Church gives helpful advice to all of us to guide us in our away giving: namely, 10 % of our net income, of which it is recommended that half goes to general charitable causes, and half to the Church itself. Of course, it can be much more. On the other hand we do have to live and there are large bills to pay, as we know only too well, but the principle is there for

us to follow. I remember that when I retired from paid employment, I was slightly nervous about how much my net income would be: in the event I decided that there were some things I really didn't need, and so I reduced my outgoings and found that I could be more generous to more deserving causes than myself. It's an exercise worth doing at regular intervals.

Jesus of course does phrase things in a way which makes the principle crystal clear, which is that all good things which come our way ultimately come from God, who enables us to provide for ourselves and others. Thus giving away is a way of saying thank you to him for the blessings he showers upon us, but we all know that we can never do enough.

“Who can be saved?”, the disciples ask. The reply from Jesus: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible”, and so this means that we are encouraged to pray constantly to him that he will show us what we are to do with our lives, so that when our “Everyman” moment comes God will say to us “you have done your best; come and take your place among the saints”.

Amen

PBW – 28.10.2022