

24th. Sunday in Ordinary Time

When I was celebrating Mass for the Year 9's and 10's on Wednesday last I was wondering how often they thought about God and about Jesus. I was wondering what kind of image they had of God. This weekend 15 young people of our parish are remembering their baptism as they begin their journey toward becoming full members of the Church with Confirmation and First Holy Communion. What image do they have of God? How well do they know Jesus? On this Safeguarding Sunday we are all being encouraged to listen to children. Perhaps we could all ask the children that we know to tell us about who God is for them.

But we could all ask the question: 'What is God like for me?' What image do I have of God? Many of the people who saw Jesus and heard what he had to say could not recognise him as the one who had come to reveal God to us. Perhaps they could not see God in Jesus because he was doing things and saying things that did not fit in with their image of God.

It was because Jesus spent so much time in the company of sinners and outcasts that many people rejected Jesus and his word. Jesus wanted those people to have a new kind of a picture of God. It was because Jesus wanted to change the hearts of these people that he told three

stories, three parables that describes for us all what God is like.

God is like a foolish shepherd who leaves behind the ninety nine sheep that were obedient enough to stay together in a flock so that he can go off and find the one sheep that had wandered away. He risks everything to find that lost sheep. And this foolish shepherd does not give up looking until he finds that wayward sheep. And when he finds the lost sheep, he carries it home on his shoulders and calls together his friends to rejoice with him. God is like a woman who having lost a small coin cleans the house from top to bottom searching everywhere for it until she has found it. And when she finds the coin she calls in her neighbours to celebrate with her. The third story we know well. God is like the father who longs for his wayward son to return home. He runs to meet him and orders a lavish meal to celebrate that the lost son has been found again.

These very powerful parables help us to understand that our God is a God of mercy. Our God is a forgiving God who puts no conditions upon the love that he has for us. When we can claim that picture of God for ourselves, when we can say that we have experienced God's unconditional love for us, then we can start to paint that picture for others. Not only can we, but we must do that. Every disciple of Jesus is called to be a sign of who God

is. Every one of us is meant to reveal something of the nature of God to others.

There is something else that comes through in these parables that we might miss. Our God breaks the rules that many of us live by. There are no winners and losers with God. God does not love someone at the expense of someone else. God is not an “either or” God. God reaches out in love to different people in the same beautiful way. We see this especially in the third parable. The father loves both of his sons, not just the one who squandered his inheritance. He runs out to welcome home the lost son. But he also goes out from the party to invite in the older son to join in the celebrations for his brother’s return.

The people who were criticising Jesus could not understand how he could have time for them and have time for the people that they called sinners. The God that they prayed to is a God who blesses the good and rewards the just and who punishes law breakers and condemns sinners. How could Jesus sit at table with those who break the law? How could Jesus eat with sinners if he is a prophet of God?

I began by asking you to listen to what images young people may have of God. Pope Francis wrote a beautiful exhortation to young people after the Synod on youth.

He encouraged young people to think about Jesus in this way. “Finally, there is a third truth, inseparable from the second: Christ is alive! We need to keep reminding ourselves of this, because we can risk seeing Jesus Christ simply as a fine model from the distant past, as a memory, as someone who saved us two thousand years ago. But that would be of no use to us: it would leave us unchanged; it would not set us free. The one who fills us with his grace, the one who liberates us, transforms us, heals and consoles us is someone fully alive. He is the Christ, risen from the dead, filled with supernatural life and energy, and robed in boundless light. Alive, he can be present in your life at every moment, to fill it with light and to take away all sorrow and solitude. Even if all others depart, he will remain, as he promised: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (*Mt 28:20*). He fills your life with his unseen presence; wherever you go, he will be waiting there for you. Because he did not only come in the past, but he comes to you today and every day, inviting you to set out towards ever new horizons. See Jesus as happy, overflowing with joy. Rejoice with him as with a friend who has triumphed. They killed him, the holy one, the just one, the innocent one, but he triumphed in the end. Evil does not have the last word. Nor will it have the last word in your life, for you have a friend who loves you and wants to triumph in you. Your Saviour lives.”