

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A – 1st October 2023

Be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind...always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of their own interests first, but everyone thinks of other people's interests instead.

These words from our second reading leapt out from the page at me. We really should have those words of St Paul put on a notice in a prominent place in church – for they touch the heart of what a Christian community is all about. That is every Parish Priest's dream. Sadly the reality all too often falls very far short of this.

We live in a society that constantly calls us to do just the opposite of what St Paul says – to think of ourselves, to look after number one. Little wonder sociologists speak of 'the me generation.'

Unity and a common purpose is so crucial. Especially in a parish. And yet all too often the opposite – disunity can occur.

It happens when conflicts flare up in parish groups, when someone wants to force their own agenda on every one else, or when cliques form and people feel excluded from what is going on.

It happens when misunderstandings arise because people don't speak up to express their opinion – or worse still – as in our gospel today, when they say they will do one thing and then do the opposite.

Some people are generous with their word – they promise you the sun, moon and the stars – but you can't rely on them. There is not one of us here who has not experienced the pain of being let down by someone who failed to keep their word. There are other people around who are slow to give their word. They don't make promises or commit themselves to tasks very easily. But when they do make a promise, you can rely on them totally to honour it. Such people are pure gold.

When the Father in Jesus' story today asked his two sons to go and work in the vineyard, one of the sons said an immediate and definite 'yes.' He gave his solemn word that he would go. But he didn't keep his word. The other son also gave his word. He said he wouldn't go. However, later he changed his mind and went.

I suspect there is something of each son in all of us – at times our performance doesn't always match our promises; we sometimes give our word but don't always keep it – and there is part of the other son in us because we are all capable of turning a 'no' into a 'yes.'

I don't think Our Lord was holding either son up as an ideal – yet we can learn from them both. The son who said he would go but didn't is meant to act as a warning to us – what sort of example do we give when our lives do not bear witness to the faith we profess with our lips? When our own agenda is the only thing that matters? When we don't speak up for what we believe to be right?

And we can learn from the son who said 'no' but later changed his mind. To change one's mind is generally regarded as a fault and a weakness. But in our case as Christians we know different. It takes humility to admit one's mistake and courage to put it right.

The second son, because he finally obeyed his father is a lot better than the first. The ideal son, however would be the son who immediately carried out his Father's wishes. That is what we should aim at. Jesus is the ideal son. As St.Paul says: 'he emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death, death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him.'

A parish is always a collection of different personalities, ages, interests, points of view. There is great richness in diversity – and we must value difference. The challenge is to find unity amidst that diversity – we serve one Lord, and we belong to one body, the body of Christ. St.Paul reminds us of the characteristics of a united community:

'There must be no competition among you – no conceit – always consider the other person - in your minds you must be the same as Christ.'

And as our gospel reminds us we must be people of our Word. We must say what we mean and mean what we say – promises can never take the place of performance and fine words can never be a substitute for fine deeds.

In his rule Saint Benedict exhorts the abbot to 'arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.' That is my hope for our parish. There is room here for all - there is something for everyone - but only as long as we put other's interests before our own and and try and avoid any sort of extremism or exclusivism. We must always count others in, and never out. We need constantly to strive for balance, harmony, peace.

The call to us today is the call to faithfulness – and faithfulness is costly. It is not an easy road. It demands unselfishness and a spirit of sacrifice. But even here on earth it brings great rewards in terms of growth, serenity and joy.

I end where I began – with those words of St.Paul. My prayer today is that we as a parish community will do all we can to transform these words in to action:

'Father, may we be united in our convictions and united in our love, with a common purpose and a common mind. Let no-one think of their own interests first but rather may everyone think of other people's interests instead. In our minds may we be the same as Christ.'

Amen.