

14TH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A – 9 JULY 2023

“Come to me, all you who labour and are over-burdened and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”

According to something I read the other day, 51% of the British population agree that we are “a nation of bad losers”, we don’t, apparently, deal well with failure, whether in sport or in other contests.

In contrast, from the gospel we learn that although Our Lord’s ministry in his own province of Galilee was largely unsuccessful, he accepts it as the will of his Father. Our Lord is able to face the failure of his work because his inner purpose was to do his Father’s will. He has something to fall back on. To face failure with no inner resources is to face an empty self. But Jesus sees in his failure a particular wisdom: that his Father is making a positive choice to reveal his truth to the little ones, while hiding it from those who are self-important and smug.

In Jesus’ time there were whole groups of people who are dismissed as sinners because they followed what were regarded as dishonourable callings - people who led life-styles that did not permit them to observe the small print of the Law. Among these groups are the shepherds, donkey-drivers, pedlars and tax-collectors. All these people are deprived of civil rights, forbidden to act as a witness in court, and refused entry into the synagogue. They are at the bottom of the social heap, ignored. But Jesus has a word for them and for those who are bowed down by an interpretation of the Law that leaves them disempowered, helpless:

“Come to me, all you who labour and are over-burdened and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”

Our Lord has no intention of doing away with the Law, for Laws are important, but he refuses to support the lawyers who spend their time manufacturing new burdens for broken people. Jesus offers all these people an invitation: “Come to me, learn from me...and you will find rest for your souls.” Jesus makes himself the centre of his own teaching. He doesn’t say

“Come to the law, and you will find rest for your souls,” he said “Come to me - learn from Me - and you will find rest...”

All of us at times feel undervalued, mis-understood - over-burdened by work, rules, authority - devastated by personal failures. Yet all is not lost - those burdens can actually be a means of grace. One of my favourite quotations of all time is by St John Henry Newman who wrote: “it is a rule of God’s providence that we should succeed by failure.” I think he meant by this that our failures and losses can actually lead us closer to God because through them we can learn to lean and rely on Him and not on ourselves or on the socially-accepted code of success. The Sacraments of Penance and of the Holy Eucharist are the means through which Christ brings relief and life to us who labour and are over-burdened. As a nation, we may be bad losers – but for us as Christians losing is never the end of the story - for in failure there is always to be found somewhere the seeds of victory.