

The 14th Sunday of Year C: Optimism & good choices.

First Reading: Isaiah 66:10-14: Future hope for Jerusalem;

Second Reading: Galatians 6:14-18: The 'cross' is Paul's chief boast!

Gospel: Luke 10:1-12+17-20: Jesus sends out the 72; they have success.

Here's a question: what's the difference between being piously unworldly and being simply feckless? In the gospel, Jesus told his 72 disciples (part of his big number of general followers, not the 12 apostles), as he sent them out on a missionary expedition: "Carry no purse, haversack or sandals...stay in the same house, taking what food & drink they have to offer." To be fair, theirs was a world where travellers could rely on hospitality, and ordinary people thought nothing of offering a bed (or just a space on the floor) to someone who called. Living conditions were, to us, very simple - even scruffy – and people were used to smells, insects and vermin that might horrify us! Jesus was not telling his disciples to be 'feckless', but to be normal, and behave as others did.

Down the centuries, there have been movements in the Church that have tried to re-capture the simplicity shown in this weekend's gospel. Some religious orders have started that way, but as they acquired wealth, they lived in quite grand properties, although the priests, monks or nuns in them had no possessions of their own. Perhaps the order that has tried hardest to keep its individual members' lifestyles very close to this gospel is the Franciscans. Many will know of the suspicion that St Francis caused in Rome by his attachment to "holy poverty". Yet even they have had to adapt to the modern world – there was an article in the papers some years ago about their re-designed habits needing special places for mobile phones! Unless a religious order is totally enclosed, most priests in it will have a driving license – so they can take the order's car to help in parishes or hospitals. That's 'poverty' today.

In the full version of this gospel, we see the 72 return to Jesus, flushed with success. They had been told to preach the nearness of God's Kingdom (in practice, how the presence of God should influence our lives) and people had responded well. But this raises a question for those in full-time religious work: should we rejoice at "success" and be miserable at "failure"? If we were in business, trying to sell things, this would be a natural response, but we are not "in business". This is reflected in what Jesus said to the 72, and what St Paul wrote in the 2nd reading, at the end of his Letter to the Galatians.

At the end of the gospel story, Jesus acknowledged that the 72 had been successful: “I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven....I have given you power to tread underfoot the whole strength of the enemy.” But then he added (in his very Jewish way): “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you; rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven.” This meant that they should be thankful, not so much for their “success”, as for the fact that God could see that they were good people, doing their best. This would have been true, even if they had not achieved very much.

St Paul made a similar point in the second reading, which is the last few verses of his Letter to the Galatians. This letter dealt with the controversial topic of how we are saved: is it through faith in Jesus’ death & resurrection, or by our own good works and efforts? The argument, going back to the New Testament, has been a ‘hot’ topic all through Christian history, and was one of the major disputes at the time of the Reformation in the 1500’s. St Paul stressed the role of “faith” in our salvation; St James stressed the need for “good works”; as usual, the truth lies in the middle. But what Paul did stress in this Sunday’s extract was that there was no room for human boasting: all we can “boast” about is our Lord’s cross, that great symbol of human ‘failure’ which gave us Christian redemption. Through this cross we become “altogether new creatures” – this means a style of living different from other people. He ended the letter by writing, “I want no more trouble from anyone after this...” He certainly did not pull any punches in dealing with the Galatians’ awkward squad!

Where does this leave you and me? I expect few of you reading this to be religious ‘professionals’, but many could have important roles in parish life. In that sense, you are like the “72” – not full-time apostles, but still followers of the Lord. But, unlike the “72”, we live in a non-religious climate. We do know the outcome of Jesus’ life & work, so here are three practical ideas, which you may find useful. First, we can give a sense of Christ’s peace & presence by both the quality of our lives and the way we react to difficult situations. Second, we should not be afraid or embarrassed to let others know our faith. Third, strident religious statements do very little good, because they make us sound neurotic. They may attract some, but I fear they put most people off. I suggest that a calm, friendly (and down-to-earth) approach is the best advert for the Faith. *Fr Jim Dunne.*