

Sunday Homily

25th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

19 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

"If anyone wants to be first,
he must make himself last of all and servant of all."

Illustration

The fourteenth century was a time of frequent wars and bloodshed in the city states of Italy. It was so bad that a nobleman, Bernardo Tolomei, withdrew to an isolated mountain, Monte Oliveto, together with other like-minded men, to found a monastery. There, the community spent its time in prayer and religious life, far removed from the violence and evils of the world.

However, in 1348, the plague swept through the nearby city of Siena, and the community faced a choice of whether to stay in the security of their religious life or to come down from their mountain sanctuary. They decided they could not stand by, watching people suffer and die, without attempting in some way to alleviate their suffering. They came down from their monastery and, despite the risks to themselves, spent their time ministering to the sick and dying. More than eighty monks from the community were killed by the plague – a danger they had been only too aware of.

Gospel Teaching

There is always a cost involved in service. There is always a need for us to come down from our "spiritual mountain". On the mountain that Jesus' disciples had just left, some of them had seen Jesus transfigured – they had glimpsed his divinity as God's Son. They had wanted to remain there on the mountain – to build three tents, three shrines to prolong that marvellous religious experience. But they had to come down – to leave that experience behind. Jesus wanted to explain to his disciples the nature of his mission, and that this would inevitably lead to him paying the cost of his life.

But the disciples are slow to understand, even though Jesus specifically takes them away from the crowds to teach them. And they are afraid to ask what he means. Perhaps they dare not ask because of the last time Jesus spoke of his impending death: Peter had protested that this must not happen, and, for his pains, Jesus had called him "Satan", accusing him of thinking as human beings think, not as God thinks. But perhaps the disciples simply prefer not to know what Jesus is talking about. He keeps referring to suffering and death, whereas they are obviously more interested in who is the greatest. They wonder which of them will get the important jobs, the key positions, in the kingdom, which they are sure Jesus, as the Messiah, is about to establish in Jerusalem.

The penny hasn't dropped about the true nature of discipleship. They think it is about glory, prestige and power. Jesus speaks simply in terms of service – and of the cost of service. It is as if the disciples are still up there on their religious mountain, refusing to come down to face the consequences – and the cost – of their faith in Christ.

Application

What does Jesus' teaching about the need to be "servant of all" and to welcome little children mean for us today? In the society of Jesus' day, a child was someone of no legal status – in a sense, an unimportant person. And so anything done to or for a child was done simply for the sake of the child, without hope of reward or advantage. This was an opportunity to show genuine, disinterested love, unfeigned respect.

This is to be the hallmark of Christ's disciples: that we will love without hope of profit or reward; that we will respect the intrinsic dignity and worth of others, no matter what their position, power or wealth. God loves unconditionally. When we love like that, then we are not just loving like God, we are loving God. In welcoming those who are lowest and least important, we are – in a very real way – welcoming and worshipping God. We are coming down from our religious mountain and putting our faith into practice.

There is always a price to be paid for true service. Love is not cost-free, even though that is an illusion that we – like the disciples – like to maintain. But Christ's teaching about the need to be prepared to suffer and die also contains the promise that this road leads to the glory of the resurrection. Like the monks of Oliveto, we have to decide if we want the illusion of pure, unsullied religion, or whether we are ready to get our hands dirty in serving real people in real situations, no matter what the cost. That is the only way to offer real love to God, and the only way to enter real, eternal life.