

7th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

In *Canal Dreams*, by the popular author Iain Banks, the story is told of a Japanese musician, a famous cellist, who is stranded, with several other people on a ship in the Panama Canal during a period of civil war. She is on her way from Japan to Europe for a concert tour and hates flying, so takes the sea route – which proves disastrous. For after a period of waiting for a lull in the fighting, the ship she is on is stormed by ruthless insurgents. These rebels eventually assault the musician horribly and shoot down her companions.

However, she takes revenge by a combination of cunning and ruthlessness, tracking down and destroying all her enemies. Even while some are escaping on a small boat, she sees that the water around them is flooded with burning oil and takes delight in seeing the flames engulf them. At the end of the book the reader is left feeling exhilarated, exhausted and triumphant. For hasn't she done something tremendous? Single-handed and weak as she was, she wreaked revenge on a whole battalion of armed fighters.

This makes the reader feel strong and in control – which is why there are so many violent revenge books and movies, or “shoot ‘em ups” on the market. They reflect a raw instinct in us all. We hear the “stand up for yourself” argument used everywhere. “Nobody treats me like that”. “Do them or sue them”. “Look out for Number One.” Don't let them get away with it.”

Today's readings could not be further from that school of thought. When David had the opportunity to kill his enemy King Saul, he spared rather than speared him. His great victory here was a moral one; he would not harm the Lord's anointed. The second reading explains that we inherit our earthly nature from our ancestor Adam – the nature of the basic instincts we need for survival and control.

But then we learn that this nature can be transcended: that we do not have to be trapped for ever in an earth-bound cycle of violence and sin. The very spirit of God is breathed on us by Jesus, the last Adam, making us new creatures, heaven-bound and Christ-like. So when Jesus instructs us, his disciples, in the Gospel, to do great deeds of charity, forgiveness and self-sacrifice, we know it is through the power of the Spirit that such can be achieved.

Last week we heard the Beatitudes – this week we are called to put them into action. What Jesus asks us is to be heroic in loving others. To love is so easy when all is going well. But when all is going badly for us, what is asked here goes way beyond what common sense and society demand. We are called on to do good acts, to bless, to pray, for those very people who are most against us. Indeed the standard of our compassion – our ability to suffer together with another – is to be no less than that of God. And we know how much God loves through today’s psalm – God is compassion and love God’s *hesed*, God’s loving kindness, God’s faithful love, is shown to us at all times. God forgives all our guilt and heals all our ills. Our Father does not treat us according to our deserts, but simply as children on whom he showers gifts – as the Gospel describes - “pressed down, shaken together, and running over.”

So the challenge has been made and the means provided, if we are open to let the Spirit work within us. All that remains is our willingness to take up the challenge. Nobody says loving where it hurts is easy, or that the consequences will be favourable. The old Hollywood films may show goodness being rewarded by smiles all round and happy endings. In real life the gratitude of others is far from guaranteed. In fact, persecution and contempt are quite likely to follow. The cross of Christ and the martyrdom of the first apostles show that. Love can be a flame that burns as well as warms. And yet we yearn for it. We are “hard wired” to seek for and receive love. It is at the core of our being as much as is the destructive and violent side of our nature. It is our choice whether we go with the instinct to avenge ourselves or answer Christ’s call to be bearers of that love that God gives to us all.