

# Sunday Homily

## 14<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

4 JULY 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II

“He was amazed at their lack of faith.”

### Illustration

Who are the people that we tend to ignore or pass by? Many of us find it difficult to deal with beggars. It is easier to pretend not to see them and pass by. Some people tend to ignore people in wheelchairs, especially if they have somebody wheeling them or standing by. The conversation takes place with the person assumed to be the carer; wheelchair occupants are often treated as people who cannot speak for themselves.

People who serve us in shops or get us tickets for transport or leisure activities, they too can somehow disappear off our radar as human beings. We only really notice them when they are inefficient or all too human in their responses, perhaps a little like ourselves. Then we may ignore those who are closest to us in the household. As the saying goes, “Familiarity breeds contempt”, and we can too easily take our nearest and dearest for granted, not really noticing who they are any more or what is concerning them.

There is an argument that we would become overloaded if we tried to take on board the full humanity of all the people we meet. Yet if we let go of that recognition of the other as an important human being, our equal and equally worthy of respect, we can lose sight of our own humanity. And if we lose sight of our own humanity, we lose sight of Christ.

### Gospel Teaching

Jesus has just been consolidating the early days of his mission with miracles of healing, the casting out of unclean spirits, the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage and the raising of the daughter of Jairus. In each case the faith of the recipient has been highlighted. Now he returns to his own home town of Nazareth to find that he is not acknowledged in either his wisdom or his power to do miracles. The reason for the people’s disbelief is quite simple. They know who he is. They have known him from his childhood, and they know all the members of his family. This knowledge creates a prejudice within them that cannot accept that Jesus may have an extraordinary message or extraordinary powers. He himself is said to be amazed at their lack of faith.

In his comments on this reaction of his neighbours Jesus aligns himself with the prophets who have gone before him. He has taken on their mantle, and like them

he is rejected. As a result of this he will begin the journey that will take him to his own suffering and death. He will also be found living on the outskirts of the towns, in the wilderness or in foreign territories. The message of faith does not find its roots where we might expect, in the centres of traditional belief; instead it is heard on the margins of society. Jesus becomes the outsider who will inspire belief in those whose natural habitat is on the margins, ignored or kept at a distance by those who are powerful and successful.

## Application

We still find Jesus where we least expect to encounter him. The gift of faith enables us to stay open to this possibility. Our assumption may be that we will find him in our churches, in holy, devout and respectable people. That is where we tend to look for him; and, if we become set in our ways, we forget that he appears in the very ordinariness of our humanity.

The incarnation reveals Jesus as the one who takes our humanity in its fullness and makes it divine. This mystery of salvation does not mean that our ordinariness is taken away. Rather it is our very ordinariness that becomes the instrument of transformation. On the one hand we see more clearly the miracle that we are. On the other hand this miraculous nature reveals itself to our new vision of faith. And it happens where and when we least expect it, in the casual exchange with a beggar on the streets, in the smiles of understanding offered at the checkout, in the little acts of kindness shared between family and friends.

That is why it is so important not to ignore each other or pass each other by. We miss the many-splendoured thing and become lost and sightless, thinking we see but only being aware of the outer semblance. Perhaps, too, we need to look in the mirror more carefully, at least from time to time, to remind ourselves of our own humanity and that Christ is present in us too.

# Sunday Homily

## 15<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

11 JULY 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

“And he instructed them to take nothing for the journey.”

### Illustration

The Corsican adventurer and sometime emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, once said that “an army marches on its stomach”. He wasn’t just talking about the need to feed the soldiers. The French army under Napoleon was expected to live off the land, as it went along. This enabled the army to move quickly, while other armies were held back by long and slow supply trains. This helped Napoleon win a series of unexpected victories. Not weighed down with baggage, his army could move fast, and react more quickly to a changing situation. This had some disadvantages too, especially for those who lived in the path of the army. And if the land they marched through was barren, the troops could starve, as on the famous retreat from Moscow. The strategy could bring great success, but was also very risky.

Long before, in the thirteenth century, the Church had tried a similar tactic in her fight against disbelief. Members of the Orders of St Francis and St Dominic often took to the road, lived off what people would give them, and responded quickly to requests for help from local bishops. In the campaigns of these friars, Francis and Dominic showed the way by example – often sleeping rough, begging for food and drink, eating whatever was put before them. Unburdened by property, they could move quickly. Friars like St Anthony of Padua or St Thomas Aquinas travelled thousands of miles, all over Europe, throughout their lives.

### Gospel Teaching

Napoleon, of course, served his own ends all his life, and the soldiers who trusted in him were often let down and abandoned. The friars, following the example of Christ and the apostles, despite their high-risk strategy, were never let down. As they served the high king of heaven, the supplies of grace and providence that kept them on the road – on campaign, as it were – never dried up.

What Jesus is doing in today’s Gospel is part of a larger strategy. In fact, as St Paul tells us, the strategy was laid down by God, “from the beginning”, as a “predetermined plan”. Jesus’ choosing of twelve apostles is a deliberate way of showing that his aim is to refound the people of God, as once the twelve tribes of Israel were called by God.

The apostles are to move quickly, unburdened by anything except the message of repentance and healing. Where their preaching is not welcome, they are to move on swiftly. In another military image, it is what is known as a tactic of “fire and manoeuvre”. The apostles are not to lay siege to anywhere that resists, but to move on. This creates a sense of the urgency of Christ’s message. The kingdom of heaven is close at hand; the time is now. Even before the resurrection, we see the two main weapons that Christ gives the Church – the word of God and the sacraments. The apostles are to preach, and anoint with oil to heal those who are sick.

## Application

Obviously Christ’s strategy in the Gospel reading is not meant for all. The apostles are chosen for this task at this particular time. Most of us have quite different lives, with responsibilities that we can’t just drop. However, we can all take something from this message.

Firstly, all of us carry around certain personal baggage that can hold us back, and make us less fruitful: perhaps an old grudge, a certain envy or resentment of someone else. We may find something difficult to forgive, we might be unreasonably fearful of something. We may be held back by an unworthy attachment to something. All such things can both frustrate our own development and prevent us from contributing all that we could. Part of the Gospel message of repentance is trying to put aside this negative baggage, to travel more lightly and be freer to serve.

Secondly, Christ has given us a means to get rid of this sort of baggage. Through the sacraments we can both leave behind what hinders us, and move forward in the service of Christ. We have each been chosen from all eternity, to be co-workers in God’s plan of redemption; we have “been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit”, enlisted in God’s service, like the apostles. We “have heard the message of the truth and the good news of salvation, and have believed it”. It took great faith and courage for the apostles to do what Christ told them, and we too can ask for that faith and courage.

# Sunday Homily

## 16<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

18 JULY 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

“He took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

### Illustration

The catacombs in Rome are an amazing sight to see. They are burial places unlike the ones we're generally used to. Lying just outside the old Roman city walls, they consist of vast labyrinths of underground passageways, lined on either side by many tiers of burial places, like enormous dormitories of multilayered bunk beds. There are many miles of them. The early Christians in Rome buried their dead like this because they were not a wealthy community and they could not afford to buy all the land they would have needed to bury their dead in open-air cemeteries. It also gave them a place to worship when the Roman authorities were persecuting Christians, and it allowed these early Christian communities to bury their dead together, following Christian beliefs about death and the afterlife.

One tomb in the catacombs belongs to an eight-month-old baby boy, called Aurelius Castus. His mother, Antonia, had the tomb made for him when he died in the third century and she had both their names carved on the marble slab covering the opening of the tomb. But she didn't just have their names carved, she also had an image carved onto the marble slab. This image was of a man carrying a sheep across his shoulders with two more sheep at his feet. It is the image of the good shepherd.

### Gospel Teaching

This image was not meant to be a portrait of Christ: it was meant as a symbol, like the Christian images we are more familiar with today, images of fish, or a dove, or the cross. It was a particularly apt symbol for burials as it called to mind the words of today's psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd", with its comforting message that we shall live in the Lord's house for ever. Images of shepherds crop up in many places in the Bible. In today's readings we have examples from both the Old and New Testaments with the prophet Jeremiah, the psalmist and Mark the evangelist all using the image of the shepherd to great effect.

In today's Gospel we hear about Jesus and his apostles, worn out from their ministry, seeking a bit of peace and quiet to recuperate. But, like the mother of a newborn baby, exhausted from sleepless nights but still able to comfort her child, Jesus still finds a bit more to give to the people who come to him. Mark describes the people as being "like sheep without a shepherd" and it seems

Jesus cannot let them stay in this state. Jesus is the good shepherd for everyone. We only get half the story in today's reading, as the following verses in the Bible tell how these same people are fed in the famous miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus does not just look after their spiritual needs, he provides for their physical needs too. He really is a good shepherd.

## Application

The image of the good shepherd can show us a few things about Jesus. Jesus as shepherd echoes the image of King David in the Old Testament, working as a shepherd before he became king. Jesus comes from the line of David as was prophesied in today's first reading. The genealogy of Jesus is detailed at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel to prove his relationship with King David. But Jesus truly is a shepherd king, ready to care for his flock rather than to take on the grandeur of power.

Picturing Jesus as our shepherd also emphasises God's kindness to us. Jesus takes on the role of caring for all our needs and guiding us through life if we will follow him. As he takes on this lowly role of shepherd, we can see that God isn't distant or unapproachable. In Jesus, God is physically present and is ready to meet all our needs.

The image of the good shepherd also highlights our weakness and folly. Compared with God's greatness we are as helpless as sheep. We may rather not think of this, preferring to be proud of our achievements and status, but it is good for us to be reminded that we are all dependent upon God's grace. Fortunately for us, through God's grace we are given the great gift of Jesus to be our shepherd, and we can be confident that if we follow him we are in the very best of care.

# Sunday Homily

## 17<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

25 JULY 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“A large crowd followed him,  
impressed by the signs he gave.”

### Illustration

Fr Werenfried van Straaten was born in the Netherlands in 1913. He entered religious life as a Norbertine at the Abbey of Tongerlo in Belgium. His life coincided with the brutal conflicts that ran through much of twentieth-century history. In the deprivation and displacement of post-war Europe, it quickly became clear to him that millions of people, many of them Catholic, were suffering as refugees. More than this, behind the so-called Iron Curtain, clergy, religious and laity were being persecuted viciously on account of their faith in what he referred to as the “Church of Silence”.

In response, on Christmas Day 1947, Fr Werenfried established the Catholic pastoral charity Aid to the Church in Need. Working initially in Eastern Europe, its mission expanded to support the struggling Church in Latin America, in Africa and in Asia. It now manages thousands of projects all over the world, from Siberia to China. It assists with the training of seminarians and offers support to religious brothers and sisters. It enables communities to build or rebuild their churches and chapels, often after warfare and persecution. It provides religious programming on radio and television, and prints Bibles. Faithful to the spirit of its founder, Aid to the Church in Need has a special concern for the needs of refugees.

In the light of his faith and his many experiences, some of which were incredibly tough, one of Fr Werenfried’s simple yet profound comments was this: “God is better than we think.”

### Gospel Teaching

St John’s Gospel doesn’t speak of Jesus performing miracles. Instead, it describes the miraculous things Jesus did as signs. A sign either points us somewhere or tells us something and this is true of the signs Jesus gave us.

The feeding of a five-thousand-strong crowd was such an impressive sign that those who were fed by Jesus literally wanted to crown him as their king. But this sign operates on many different levels. It points, first of all, to the wonderful compassion of Jesus, who was so concerned for the human needs of those around him. This tells us that Jesus is interested in the details of our life, our worries and our fears.

Secondly, the feeding of the crowd points us to the faith of the disciples. Philip was unsure when Jesus asked him where enough bread could be bought to feed everyone. Andrew did a little better. He took a hesitant step in faith and pushed forward the small boy with five loaves and two fish. At the command of Jesus, however, the disciples trustingly did exactly what he asked. This tells us that living by faith can sometimes be shaky and unclear, but that the word of Jesus can be relied upon.

Finally, this sign points us to God's generous provision for our needs. We can often be tempted to doubt that God can supply the things that are essential. By miraculously feeding the impossibly large with the incredibly small, Jesus reminds us that God is better than we might think, that God always wants to nourish us, both humanly and spiritually. The supreme sign of this is the Eucharist, when we receive the food and drink that point us towards heaven and tell us we are loved.

## Application

Fr Werenfried van Straaten staked his life on the truth Jesus teaches through this sign in the Gospel. He believed that God is generous, that God desires to give open-handedly. But Fr Werenfried also knew another truth. He knew that God uses people, mostly ordinary people, to meet the needs of others. The whole event of the feeding of the five thousand was founded on the generosity of a child who was willing to place what he had into the hands of Jesus, to put it at God's disposal.

The full version of the quotation from Fr Werenfried is actually this: "People are better than you think; God too is better than you think." Some people will only experience God's generosity through our willingness to give of what we have and, in faith, to allow God to multiply the graces and benefits that will flow from it.

In this Eucharist we present to God the smallness of our lives and the ordinariness of bread and wine. As we give thanks, in memory of Christ, these gifts are changed and we are made holy by the food of eternal life. May the power of God's love strengthen us to trust more deeply in God's care and to show that care to others by sharing what is ours.