

“Always pondering spiritual things.”

Collect

Sadly, in the wake of the pandemic, many previously practising Catholics have simply not returned to Mass and the practice of their Faith. Having been repeatedly told that it's okay not to go to Mass, many Catholics have now got out of the habit and have begun to think that if they can get through the last two years without the sacraments then they can probably get through the rest of life without them too. I mean, in the end, does it really matter whether we go to Mass or not?

The answer to that question lay in today's readings. King David acted contrary to expectations when he refused to kill the sleeping and defenceless Saul, and Our Lord teaches a message that is wholly opposed to the mores of the society in which He lives. In these readings we have two main points. First, we are taught by God to be generous in our treatment of others, to be patient in the face of provocation, to be gentle and compassionate to those in need, and to give more than social norms demand. The second point is that the demands and the values of Christianity are utterly opposed to the demands and the values of the world. There is, really, no common ground whatsoever. Let me be controversial for a moment and consider public fundraising events such as Red Nose Day or Comic Relief. Demonstrably, huge sums of money are raised, and good works follow, and to this end we may applaud the organizers, and one certainly wouldn't want them to stop. Nonetheless, even these good works are centered not so much on the needs of others as on the celebrity status of those leading the fundraising. There is always a great deal of razzmatazz, with fanfares and showbiz frenzy. Well, if it helps those in need, I repeat, that's a good thing of course. But the values of Christianity are quite other. As we shall hear at the beginning of Lent, Our Lord

says, when you give alms ‘your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing: your almsgiving must be in secret, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you’ (Mt 6:3-4). And this is the point.

When Our Lord was asked what, is the greatest Commandment? He replied that it was to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Mt 22:37-39). In other words, there are two dimensions to reality in the sense that there is a supernatural world above us and there is the natural world here below. Our priority is always to focus on, and to love, God and the things of God, and then – as something distinct but not separate from our love of God – we must love our neighbours. Loving our neighbour is not a secondary consideration or an afterthought. No, loving our neighbour is integral to, and concomitant upon, loving God, as St John teaches in one of his Letters later on in the New Testament, ‘he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.’ (1 Jn 4:20). Loving God and neighbour cannot be separated. The pious soul who prays all day but does nothing practical for his neighbour is failing in Christian charity. But the person of good will who works ceaselessly for his neighbour but fails even to acknowledge the existence of God will suffer any fruits of his labours to be limited to rewards in this life only. Although we cannot get to heaven without good works, good works alone are not enough to get us there.

St Paul, in today’s second reading, goes to some lengths to make the point. Teasing out the differences between Adam, the first man, and Christ the Second Adam or the ‘second man,’ he teaches us that Adam is of the earth but that the Second Adam is of heaven, and whilst we are modelled at birth on the earthly man, so – if we are to attain to everlasting life – we need to become modelled through the sacraments on the heavenly man. This ‘modelling’ is not only about imitation: we do not become more like to Christ *only* by

copying His behaviour. We become more like to Christ as a result of being infused with His grace, which comes to us, chiefly, through the sacraments, especially when they are then wrapped in prayer.

So, if our lives are to stand out in sharp contradistinction from the lives of those who do not believe – if we are truly to love our enemies and to pay back with good those who harm us – then we need the supernatural help of Almighty God that comes to us in the form of grace.

And this we cannot get through the glitz of high-profile charity fundraising, nor even through live-streamed celebrations of the sacraments, but by going to Confession frequently, and by receiving Holy Communion devoutly.