

Pentecost 7 2024 All Souls' **GOD'S ALL-SUFFICIENT GRACE** dtw

The adventure of faith requires energy and courage. It requires movement and change. If you have all the answers, you may as well go to sleep, because your work is done. But if you have questions – then the journey continues. You must seek, you must search, you must move, and sometimes you must just sit with uncertainty with a heart open to God's love and presence with you in the situation, however difficult or dark it is and whether you are aware of God's presence or not. Awareness will dawn.

In our second reading today, Paul appeals to God three times about a 'thorn in the flesh' which is tormenting him, that it would leave him. He hears God say, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." As with King David, Paul is sustained in the complexity of his humanity. Yes, Paul certainly was a complex person! But then, aren't we all? For most of us, the daily round, the common grind, throw up all manner of mental, spiritual and psychological curve balls which make life somewhat more challenging and complex than we might expect. But yet, within this experience, we can often perceive sustenance, growth and a joy that is so much deeper and more satisfying than mere happiness, as we sense the hand of God nurturing us from darkness back to light, from anxiety to hope.

Paul struggles to talk about his transcendent experience of God's presence – *and yet he does just that* – leading to insight and trust in God's grace and faithfulness in all things – especially in our weakness. This theme runs through each of the readings – in David's life and leadership – with Jesus, who recognised his own 'weakness' in his hometown and among his own people where he observed that a prophet is not honoured, that familiarity certainly breeds contempt. In the face of this, Jesus would continue to trust God so absolutely and deeply that he could remain true to his proclamation and carry on speaking the truth in love. And often the truth was uncomfortable. He sent out the disciples to do likewise – encouraging them to be real in the circumstances in which they found themselves, not to shrink back but to call people to repentant lives. The simplicity and poverty in which they were to accomplish this is astounding to those of us who enjoy the creature comforts of modern, middle class living. 'He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics'. St Francis of Assisi wanted to take this literally into his own rule – he knew that it truly meant Trust with a capital T: trusting only in God's grace. Even Francis' own disciples, as the movement grew, could not stick to such a harsh rule, but Jesus' words certainly make the point. All of us may choose a measure of spiritual poverty, even in our more materialistic and consumerist living, should we want to discern and imitate this surrender to grace more fully. For some of us there may be no choice in the matter at all, as unexpected burdens come our way. There is, to quote the title of a book by Richard Foster, *freedom of simplicity*. It is a discipline to be developed in the serious Christian life. Foster, a

Quaker, wrote another classic in his own time, *Celebration of Discipline*, which also has a wonderful chapter on simplicity.

Remember, Jesus said *Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven...and all these things will be there as well.* (Mt 6.33) Kingdom values turn all our very human questions upside down. As stewards of our possessions, instead of asking how much we should give away, we find ourselves asking how much we really need to keep. We may need to separate out our needs from our wants and, as conscientious believers, indulge our wants less often. I have always admired the saying: *Live simply, that others may simply live.* It was a *Christmas Bowl* slogan many years ago. Can we trust God more to supply our needs? More importantly, can God trust us to be faithful stewards of God's rich bounty to us? There are no rules. Only God's Grace. It is a generous heart and open hand that knows how to give. Such generosity towards others and God's Church will have an impact because we have a passion for God's reign and Kingdom values, and because God has changed us.

And *Change* is the word. When you take a look at so many of the great people of the Bible and of the Church, like Augustine, Francis, John Wesley, Thomas Merton, time and time again you discover big changes in priorities taking place as the call of the Kingdom makes its impact. In most cases big material decisions are made. Most of the disciples left everything in an extravagant abandonment to follow Christ. A rich young man was told that he would need to sell all his possessions and give to the poor to apprehend the call of the Kingdom. Zacchaeus, the tax collector was better off: he gave away half. John Wesley never spent more than 30 pounds a year on his personal needs, but his income rose to 1400 pounds because of the sale of his books. He continued to live on 30 pounds because that was all his needs required. That doesn't mean that you or I have to. Each of us has our own path to travel, our own decisions to make, in our walk with God.

I conclude with a prayer by Michael Leunig.

Dear God, we pray for another way of being; another way of knowing.

Across the difficult terrain of our existence we have attempted to build a highway and in so doing have lost our footpath. God lead us to our footpath: lead us there where in simplicity we may move at the speed of natural creatures and feel earth's love beneath our feet. Lead us there where step-by-step we may feel the movement of creation in our hearts. And lead us there where side-by-side we may feel the embrace of the common soul. Nothing can be loved at speed. God lead us to the slow path: to the joyous insights of the pilgrim; another way of knowing: another way of being. Amen