

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

The pattern of our daily lives over the past six months has seemed very grey, although the return to regular Mass in the parish church and the initial trickle turning to a babbling brook of faithful parishioners (all babbling, by the way, is in the car park where social distancing is scrupulously observed!) has only lifted the monotony a little. My brother priests have reported the same sort of mood music from their parishes so I am not alone, although I do consider myself particularly fortunate in that on Sundays we have virtually reached the capacity Covid - 19 regulations allow. It may all be a bit monochrome, we are more than a little nervous and apprehensive about a *second wave*, and we are more concerned for our children and elderly than we might normally be as autumn slips inevitably into winter.

The balance of the scales may seem terribly weighted towards gloom and negativity, and yet most people I meet and myself included feel that the past six months have been immensely rewarding in terms of what we have learned about our character, about our resilience, about the caring networks that criss-cross our parish and, for a Christian faith-community it may seem obvious but has all the freshness of a new discovery, of just how much our Catholic faith means to us. As we hear the scriptures read at Mass, as we reflect on the gospel narrative, the words leap off the page as they trigger some reflection, some thought or some prayer that helps us to make sense of Covid - 19. I feel I am still on a learning curve, especially where truths I took completely for granted seem to have a new relevance. One of the things which most struck me as we emerged from lock-down was not just the resilience of our parish as a family and community, but also the amount of practical co-operation and structured planning went in to the whole process of opening up. The fact that we have succeeded so well is a tribute to that planning, cooperation and then steady application of the new discipline at our liturgies so that everyone felt welcome, comfortable and sufficiently at ease to enjoy being back at Mass again.

Today's gospel reading must have been inspired by a failure in one or more of the very early Christian communities to reach a consensus, to agree on simple matters of internal regulation or to have a policy at hand to deal with a difficult or obstreperous member. Someone will have remembered about what Jesus said about reconciliation, approaching an unhappy or cantankerous member with love and gentleness to start with, then with a more firm approach and then finally - and only then - come to him/her as a group and put to them how their behaviour is undermining the unity of the community. But it is always inspired by and motivated by love - love for the individual, love for the community as a whole. The Covid - 19 crisis has reminded us just how much we love our parish community and to be so grateful for the type of solidarity among its members that made return to "normal" so trouble-free.

Father Patrick