

Reflection for 20th Week in Ordinary Time Year B

As of this weekend, we no longer need to book a place at the Sunday liturgy. Emails no longer need to be sent or telephone calls made. We are, once again in a different place, familiar and yet very unfamiliar. Today, things are different, perhaps better for most but there are some who are still a little anxious. There is never a perfect time or a place to meet the challenges that we now face, but it is a significant moment in the life of the local Church. Things are different in the Church and in society. In many respects, we are in a new time and place. There is a different landscape of faith, but still the same gospel to be announced. Our lookout points are different and the contours on our map of faith are to be found in different places, perhaps a better place, perhaps not. It can be difficult to make sense of God and to try and work out where God fits into this human drama. It has forced the world to stop and to think about a fragile humanity. There is no doubt that people have struggled during the pandemic and that struggle has taken on different forms and experiences. The long-term effects on people's livelihood have still to be fully understood as some parts of the world move faster out of lockdown than others do. It would be naïve to think that we have left the pandemic behind us. Searching for God and finding an appropriate image of God in these times have presented their own challenges. However, the message of the Gospel remains. Our challenge is how can we convey the message of the Gospel to people of faith and those of no faith in an ever-increasing secular society? There are no ready-made answers. We need to discover and capture our imaginations with a life-giving image of God that can generate within us a new energy of faith for a post-pandemic Church. Perhaps these words of Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German theologian, may offer us some food thought.

“The message about God and his mercy coming alive today acquires relevance especially in the context of the new evangelisation which is not concerned with a cheap assimilation or currying favour with today's fashions and moods. The new evangelisation cannot proclaim a new gospel, but it can make the one and the same gospel contemporary in a new situation. As preachers, we will only reach the hearts of our hearers when we speak of God concretely in light of people's hardships, and woe and help them to discover the merciful God in their own story. In this process, it does no good only to be critical of the modern world and contemporary human beings (which we are too). We must attend to the present situation with mercy and say that, above all the fog and frequent gloominess of our world, the merciful countenance of a Father prevails who is patient and kind, who knows and loves each individual, and who knows what we need. (Matthew 6:8, 32)

The new evangelization can say to those who are alienated from God and the Church that God was graciously and mercifully near to them, even when they imagined that they were far from him, and just like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who went out to meet him, God has waited for them, in order to welcome them back to reinstate them in their rights as his sons. (Luke 15: 20-24) Like the good Samaritan, God picks up, as it were, from the side of the road, bends over them, and binds their wounds (Luke 10:30-35). Like the good shepherd, he goes after them, when they go astray and are caught in whatever thicket, and he puts them on his-our- shoulders and carries them full of joy, back to the community of all Christians. We can assure those who are alienated and who, nevertheless, are often much closer than they themselves think, that there is more joy in heaven over a single sinner who has repented than over ninety-nine righteous people, who do not need to repent.

(Luke 15: 3-7)

Walter Kasper, “Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life,” pages 160/161