Homily for 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A 6 November 2011 (read only)

I haven’t done the Math as our American cousins might say, but I would hazard a guess that the most often repeated phrase uttered by Jesus in the gospels is: *The kingdom of heaven can be compared to.*

When we hear these words it helps if we realise that what follows them is not going to be the description of a place called heaven. Jesus is however lifting the lid on what being heirs of the kingdom entails – and being an heir of the kingdom does require regular use of the imagination. Jesus engages us with images and scenes from daily life that will sharpen our senses to recognise where God’s love becomes manifest in the here and now as much as in the future. God’s kingdom is something to be on the look-out for in all times and places.

Weddings provide Jesus with his richest seam of images. Weddings were perhaps the most exciting events in village life. They were when village communities acted together, danced together, ate and together and presumably laughed together. They probably required people to settle or at least suspend disputes and feuds.

Weddings allow people to dress to impress, to relax in each-others’ company and they help put family and relationships at the core of life. Work and routine are suspended, put in their proper place as secondary pursuits that provide for what really matters.

When Jesus tells his parables he will surely have been remembering some real events and the characters that left an impression on him. I say this because being an heir to the kingdom surely involves recognising how the people we live among and with give us our greatest insights into the gifts of love, healing, joy and reconciliation which envelop us in God’s embrace.

One of the great English painters of the 20th Century often took as his subject the place he called home and the people he shared it with. Stanley Spencer saw his home town of Cookham as a paradise in which everything is invested with mystical significance. In his famous Cookham Resurrection the local churchyard becomes the setting for the resurrection of the dead. Christ is enthroned in the church porch, cradling three babies, with God the Father standing behind. Spencer himself appears near the centre, naked, leaning against a grave stone; his fiancée Hilda lies sleeping in a bed of ivy. At the top left, risen souls are transported to Heaven in the pleasure steamers that then ploughed the Thames.

His works often express his fervent if unconventional Christian faith. This is especially evident in the scenes that he envisioned and depicted in Cookham. Very evident in these too is the compassion that he felt for his fellow residents.

Spencer was not oblivious to the darker side of life. He lived through and participated in the First World War as a medical orderly. He saw some gruesome and challenging things and was not left unmoved. Reflecting back he could see that the realities of war jeopardised his more optimistic attitudes. He wrote: *“when I left the Slade art school and went back to Cookham*, *I entered a kind of earthly paradise. Everything seemed fresh and to belong to the morning. My ideas were beginning to unfold in fine order when along comes the war and smashes everything”.*

The horrors of war had left their deep scars but contrary to Spencer’s claim that they smashed everything one essential kingdom quality remained intact. This was Spencer’s deep empathy with real people. And it is manifest in another resurrection scene painted as a commission for the Sandham Memorial Chapel. Although his altar piece called Resurrection of the Soldiers displayed the atrocities the soldiers, including him, experienced he depicts some of the everyday, mundane activities as well as the now resurrected victims of war emerging from their graves.

As we enter this week of Remembrance we can renew our faith in God and in the capacity for goodness that still resides in the hearts of human souls.

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