Homily for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2017

A C9th bishop of Winchester, aware of his sins and transgressions left instructions that upon his death his body should not be afforded the usual dignities of a bishop.

As reported by William of Malmesbury: “*On the point of bidding farewell to earthly life, on his authority as bishop he ordered those present to inter his corpse outside, where it should be exposed both to the feet of passers-by and to the dripping of water from the eaves*.”

When the time came, however, his instructions were ignored by the clergy who laid him to rest in a prominent position inside the cathedral.

But there were unforeseen consequences; the heavens opened and there was a continuous downpour for the next forty days. So the clergy relented and transferred his remains to a grave in the open air.

And so the legend goes:

*Saint Swithuns’ day, if thou dost rain,*

*For forty days it will remain;*

*Saint Swithuns’ day, if thou be fair,*

*For forty days ‘twill rain no more.*

And Saint Swithun’s day as we all know was yesterday (is today) (15 July)

The English of course regard rain as more of a curse than a blessing, especially if it falls at this time of year when the harvest is due to begin and summer holidays are upon us.

So perhaps we are not best prepared for the beautiful message in our first reading:

*Thus says the Lord: “As the rain and snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes forth from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.”* (Isaiah 55: 10-11)

These two beautiful verses from Isaiah were the ones given to the sculptor for her work on the ambo (lectern). They speak of the reassuring content, trustworthy promises, and gentle delivery of truth that are gifted to us through our weekly diet of scripture at Mass. (look for the raindrops)

Some weeks we are more attentive to these readings and what we hear truly resonates and inspires us. At other times we can easily be distracted by what is going on in our own lives, we can find ourselves going through the motions and even question whether being faithful to regular Mass is worth the effort. But when you think of it, this shows we are actually being authentic, true to ourselves, with our struggles, doubts and anxieties. Like Bishop Swithun we know our shortcomings.

The English theologian Nicholas Lash reminds us that our present life is sandwiched between the Garden of Eden and the garden of paradise promised to the repentant thief.

Between these two gardens lies “another garden which is a place of sweat and blood, and pleading, and betrayal; a place of darkness, of the night, which is, nevertheless, also a place of most mysterious appearance, a place of freshness and unexpected recognition. This is the garden of the time between and of the way in which the wilderness is made to be what it both should and will be: paradise, God’s garden.”

Nicholas Lash illustrates how our lives intertwine with the life of Christ who suffered agony and betrayal, was buried, and then recognized as risen all in a garden.

The weeds, the rocks, the thorns and the predatory birds of the parable represent the challenges we all face as we try to make room in our hearts for God’s word to take root and grow; and grow it will.

Robert Frost describes it thus:

“How love burns through the Putting in the Seed

On through the watching for that early birth

When, just as soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes

Shouldering its ways and shedding the earth crumbs.”

Which inspires me to rejoice in the knowledge that as we seek to live our lives as best we can and contend with its challenges; each one of us is destined for the harvest of love we call Resurrection.

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