

St Mary's Concord
A Reflection based on the Homily for
28th Sunday of Ordinary Time
10 October 2021

READINGS YEAR B: Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30.

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus all churches have been closed since 26 June 2021. One Mass is permitted so that it can be livestreamed to the parish YouTube channel and to the parish Facebook page: "St Mary's Parish Church Concord". The following reflection is based on the homily from that Mass.

British art historian Kenneth Clark is perhaps best remembered for writing and hosting the BBC TV series called *Civilisation*. It was made in the late 1960s.

Sir Kenneth Clark, as he then was, described himself as a secular humanist. But his life-long study of western art gave him an insight into the role of religious belief in western societies.

In the second volume of his autobiography entitled *The Other Half: A Self-Portrait* he described an experience he had when staying in Italy.

"I had a religious experience" he wrote. "It took place in the Church of San Lorenzo but did not seem to be connected with the harmonious beauty of the architecture. I can only say that for a few minutes my whole being was irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had known before.

He went on to reflect on the experience. "This state of mind lasted for several minutes, and, wonderful though it was, posed an awkward problem in terms of action. My life was far from blameless: I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all, it was a delusion for I was in every way unworthy of receiving such a flood of grace."

He went on to explain that he was not a religious person and so he chose to ignore the experience. "Gradually the effect wore off" he wrote, "and I made no effort to retain it. I think I was right: I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course. But that I had 'felt the finger of God' I am quite sure and, although the memory of this experience has faded, it still helps me to understand the joys of the saints."

Although clearly the experience had stayed with him, he was not prepared to change. Kenneth Clark had made a choice.



Life is rarely black and white. Many of the choices we make are not about life and death, nor even about right or wrong. We are often presented with a choice between two positive paths. Which one will I follow? And sometimes the choice I make, can change my life. Today's Gospel reading is a challenging story. It is about the choices we make and those we don't make.

As Jesus and the disciples continued their journey, a man ran up to Jesus. Mark does not call him a "young man" as does Matthew and we only find out he is rich at the end of the story. The man is searching for something more in life as shown by his question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The commandments that Jesus quoted to him are concerned with how we treat others. When the man replied: "Teacher, I have kept all these from my youth" he shows that he still thinks about his relationship with God (eternal life) in terms of what he does.

When Mark says "Jesus, looking at him, loved him", he is setting the scene for what happens next. The invitation Jesus extends is more radical than simply living a good life and not harming others. And we can only respond to that invitation because God's love is working within us.

The invitation is a gift, a grace. But even after receiving that outpouring of love, the man was not ready to respond. Mark simply says, "he was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions." Mark also says that the disciples were perplexed.

When Jesus called the disciples aside to explain what had happened, he wanted them to understand the barrier that material possessions create. He used an exaggerated image: a camel passing through the eye of a needle. They were astounded. They lived in a world where material possessions were seen as a blessing from God. But fundamentally the story is not just about money and wealth. It is about the invitation that God is offering us.

The man's view of his relationship with God was about what he was doing. He kept the commandments. For Jesus, the way to God was not about what we do but about what God does: "for God all things are possible." For us, the challenge is to allow God to show us the way. That is summed up in the question: What is God asking me to do with my life?

That question is not only being asked of us at significant moments on the journey. The question is being asked of us every day. And the answer we give is reflected in the choices we make, and those choices determine the direction of my life.





In last Sunday's reflection on the Plenary Council and the role of the Holy Spirit, we saw that a key word was discernment. It is the process that we follow, if we want to find the answer to the question: What is God asking me to do in this situation?

We also saw last Sunday that the process of discernment was fine-tuned by St Ignatius Loyola as he reflected on his own experience of conversion. Ignatius understood that the whole of the Christian life is about conversion; it is about letting go of the things that are holding us back and embracing the path God is inviting us to follow.

Each year on Ash Wednesday as we begin again the season of Lent we hear the words, "turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel". That two-fold movement serves as a definition of conversion. To say yes to God's invitation is also to let go of those things that are holding us back.

Material possessions are a not barrier in themselves, but they become a barrier when we use our possessions to hold on to our independence. In his *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius understood that not everyone is called literally to give away all their possession.

Some, like St Francis, were called to live that radical form of discipleship but it is a special call. But Ignatius does say that we are all called to detachment. That means having material possessions, but not being possessed by them.

Kenneth Clark's spiritual experience in the church of San Lorenzo was like the encounter between Jesus and the man in the Gospel. As Clark reflected years later, "wonderful though it was, it posed an awkward problem in terms of action." He was not ready to let go. He was too attached to his way of life to change.

Not long before his death in 1983, Lord Kenneth Clark was received into the Catholic Church. He did not describe the journey that led to that moment but perhaps at different times in his life he had gone back to that experience.

Spiritual writers describe those experiences as moments of consolation. Discernment is allowing the memory of those moments to inform our choices. They help us to see more clearly the barriers that hold us back and they help us to say yes to the invitation, to take that next step on the journey, even if it takes us "through the eye of a needle" because for God all things are possible.

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