

Sermon 28 June, 2020

There seems to be a fair amount of “Rewarding” going on in the Gospel reading, ⁴¹*Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;* ⁴²*and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*’

But what is the reward that we will receive? Clearly it is not some kind of financial reward like those offered on Wanted Posters like those used in the Spaghetti westerns.

If it’s not that kind of reward, is it one of those that some people talk about when they say: “Your reward will be in heaven”.

A little bit of context might help.

Before Jesus sent his disciples out on their first solo mission, he imparted dire warnings about the rejection and hostility that they would inevitably face. This is the background to today’s Gospel reading. Now, just before the disciples depart with nothing but the clothes they’re standing up in, come words of reassurance and hope. But these words are not for the disciples themselves. Jesus explains that anyone who welcomes one of his disciples receives Jesus himself and, by extension, his heavenly Father. The reward for such hospitality is not for the disciples, but for those who welcome them.

So where is the reward for the disciples themselves? They have sacrificed their personal comfort, material possessions and security to go on this mission – do they not deserve some form of recompense? This passage makes it clear that any small act of kindness or thoughtfulness brings overwhelming rewards, because doing God’s work is a reward in itself. The reward for a faithful disciple is not something that can be measured “in human terms”, as St Paul describes it in his letter to the Romans – our first reading today. *“The advantage (reward) you get is sanctification”* Or to put in in other words: the disciple is rewarded by a deepening relationship with God and an experience of God’s love and spiritual gifts.

And this reward, freely given, is more fulfilling than any material incentive. We can see this in Luke’s account of the seventy disciples returning from their mission, elated and energised (Luke 10:17-20).

Let’s put in in a more down to earth example: It is that feeling that is experienced when as a child we brought breakfast in bed to our parents, even though the tea was cold and the toast burnt to a crisp. It’s the feeling that we have done something that expresses our love for the other and that almost as a secondary experience we receive parental approval.

One online marketing guru claims that “Successful marketing starts with the WIIFM factor.” WIIFM stands for “What’s in it for me?” Today’s Gospel, as with so much of Jesus’ teaching, turns this idea on its head. There is a paradox here. When we put others before ourselves, without any expectation of reward or recompense, we

receive the “prophet’s reward”, as it’s sometimes called. Where faith comes into it is in believing that, ultimately, we will be much richer for it.

In his famous prayer, St Ignatius of Loyola prays that he might “give and not... count the cost... toil, and not... seek for rest... labour, and not... ask for reward – except to know that I am doing your will”. It’s a good starting point for anyone wanting to learn how to live “under grace”, as Paul calls it.

If we are welcoming and generous; if we make the smallest of gestures, such as simply offering a cup of cold water to a child or cold tea and burnt toast to a parent; if we humble ourselves, come down to the child’s level and listen to what God is telling or showing us, our life will be immensely richer for it. Our lives may not be easy or cushy, but Jesus promises that our self-giving gestures and acts of true altruism will earn us something infinitely more fulfilling, something that goes far beyond human imagination: The joy of being in a loving relationship with God.