

WINNERS AND LOSERS: 25TH SUNDAY A

Brian Gleeson CP

Fairytales bring special joy to children because they are full of surprises. Losers become winners. Cinderella gets her prince. Goldilocks escapes from the three bears. Hansel and Gretel get rid of the wicked witch. Princess Fiona recognises something beautiful in Shrek, the green ogre. Nemo, the clown-fish boy, comes up with great plans to swim out of the dentist's fish-tank and thwart the dentist's fish-killing niece.

Things are more complex for adults. We go through life with fixed ideas about justice. This comes out in such sayings as *'if you want something you must earn it'*; *'you get what you work for'*; *'you get what you pay for'*; *'if you fall down, you've only got yourself to blame'*; *'never expect a hand-out'*; *'there's no such thing as a free lunch'*; *'you'll get yours'*, i.e. your just desserts.

Yet we know, on the other hand, that the most important thing in life, which is being loved by another, is not something that we earn, or something that we deserve. It's something which is given to us, something which depends simply on the choice and goodness of the one who loves us with no strings attached, the one who loves us out of sheer generosity.

In the pages of the gospels we meet many people who start out as losers but end up as winners. They are the physically crippled, the psychologically crippled, the spiritually crippled, and the economically crippled. They are the prodigal sons, the outcasts, the overlooked, and the ones whom the powerful and respectable simply ignore or shun. The losers end up winners because Jesus makes a clear choice in their favour. Why does he do so? Simply because Jesus knows and teaches that God's ways are not our ways, that God does not work from the mathematics of a calculator but from the fullness of his loving heart.

Jesus illustrates this in his parable today about a landowner and his employees. The employer's generosity to the latecomers in paying them a full day's wage, the same amount he paid the first workers, makes the first group as mad as hell. So they complain bitterly to their employer. The landowner defends himself with three questions to the grumblers: - 1. *'Did we not agree on one*

denarius?’ he asks; 2. ‘Have I no right to do what I like with my own [money]?’; and 3. ‘Why be envious because I am generous?’

The landowner is, of course, God - our gracious, loving, merciful God, who gives us far more than we could ever earn, deserve or hope for. The story Jesus told illustrates the difference between God’s generosity and our sense of strict justice.

Every year, round about the start of Advent, our church draws our attention to the four last things – death; judgment, heaven, hell. To speak for myself, the prospect of the judgment, both at the end of my life and at the end of time, fills me with fear at times. I ask myself: *‘What will God say to me?’ ‘What will God do to me?’ ‘What will become of me?’* When thoughts like that start to trouble me, I turn my thoughts to Jesus Christ, our Saviour. I remember how he was known as *‘the friend of sinners’*, and that it was said of him: *‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’* I remember the prayer of the repentant tax collector just inside the temple doors: *‘O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’* I remember too the words of St Paul to the Romans (4:25): *‘he died for our sins and rose for our justification [our transformation]’*. Thinking of all that Jesus our loving and forgiving Saviour has done for us, I keep placing my trust in him, and keep saying to him with St Peter as he starts to sink beneath the waves: *‘Lord, save me!’*

Thinking also of all that Jesus has taught about God and God’s ways, I take heart and hope from the words in our first Reading today: *‘Seek the Lord while he is still to be found, call to him while he is still near’*, and from those in our psalm: *‘The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in love. How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures.’*

There is something else that comes out of God’s message to us today. This is it! Since God is so kind to all, and since God has a special preference for the strugglers, the battlers, the broken, the lost, the lonely, and the losers of this world, and does everything possible to make the last come first, so should we. So the children in our parish community should not be judging other kids by their looks, or whether they get to play sport for the school, or whether they wear the latest jeans or sports shoes. None of us should feel smug or superior or contemptuous towards someone who lives in a fibro house, or works in a factory, or earns less than we do, or who cannot afford full school fees. Or towards someone who makes their great come-back to God only on their death-bed, or towards somebody who has only recently joined our church, or

towards people who have come among us only recently as migrants, asylum-seekers or refugees.

In fact, there is only one standard to follow in all our dealings with others. This is the standard of the acceptance, the welcome, the goodness, the graciousness, the kindness, the mercy, and the generosity of God. It all boils down to that WWJD question, *'What would Jesus do?'*

bgleesoncp@gmail.com