

PRIDE BEFORE A FALL: 21ST SUNDAY C

Once upon a time there was a dad who prided himself on his driving skills. He wouldn't let the mum of the family drive when he was in the car. Never! Nor would he let their one teenager with a licence drive. They were simply not competent enough, he would say, or careful enough, or responsible enough. Only he could be trusted to drive the family car. Moreover, as he drove along he would give his family a running commentary on the mistakes of other drivers. The mum and the kids had long ago learned to tune out of these commentaries. They thought: 'Away from the car, he can be a nice man, really, and anyway you have to put up with certain things in dads, don't you?'

Well, one public holiday, on their way back from a picnic, they stopped at a milk bar for an ice cream. When they were backing out of their parking space the Dad didn't see a car that was coming behind him and ploughed into it. The car was a brand new Jeep Cherokee. It had the right of way. The Dad was furious, because he knew it was really his fault. Just the same he jumped out of the family car and cursed the young man who driving the Cherokee.

All the young man could say was: 'Sir, you've wrecked my twenty-first birthday present!' The Mum said to the Dad: 'He had the right of way, didn't he?' Then the young man heaved a sigh and made sure that the Mum and the kids and the dog were all right. 'I guess I can get it fixed,' he said, as he walked away sadly and slowly. But the Dad wouldn't apologize; though everyone, himself included, knew he was in the wrong. Yet, like God, the young man forgave him anyway.

The Dad in that story was basically a good man. But, a bit like some of the people Jesus had to deal with, he had become proud and conceited and complacent, and just a bit too ready to put others down. When disagreement and conflict arose in the family, his opinion had to prevail, he himself had to come first, had to be the *numero uno*, had always to be the one in the right. But in this incident he came a cropper, and found himself on the outer with his family. The words of Jesus today came true, 'the last will be first and the first will be last'.

In that same story of Jesus today, an unnamed person asks him the question that you and I might also like to ask him: - 'How many people will be saved? A lot or only a few? And will I be among that number when the saints come marching in? Jesus refuses to answer the question directly. But it gives him an opening to warn us against complacency, to advise us not to take our spiritual health for granted, and to urge us to keep on striving and struggling to consistently live his values, standards and teachings. We might be tempted to think: 'I'm all right, Jack, I'm not a saint but I'm pretty good. I don't do anybody any harm. I'm a regular at Sunday Mass, where I hear the words of Jesus and receive him in Holy Communion.'

But is that automatically good enough? Perhaps that's being just too like those people Jesus spoke about in our gospel today, the ones who come knocking on his door and saying: 'Lord, open to us. We once ate and drank in your company; you taught in our streets.' Too like the ones that, sad to say, Jesus has to turn away from his company at the coming feast of the

kingdom of God as he says: 'I'm sorry about this. But you stopped being my friend. You stopped trying to live like me. You let the love in your heart dry up. At home and at work you became proud and selfish, arrogant and complacent, impossible to live with. You know, you and I have become strangers to each other. I really don't know you any more. You and I simply don't belong here together. Better be on your way!'

Could that really be Jesus talking, the kind and merciful Jesus? The Jesus who makes allowances? The Jesus who walks the extra mile? The Jesus who welcomes outcasts to his table? The Jesus who tells the story of the prodigal son? The Jesus who dines with Zacchaeus and tells him, 'today salvation has come to your house'? The Jesus who forgives the repentant thief? The Jesus who prays for his executioners, 'Father, forgive them'?

Yes, it's the very same Jesus, all right. For the Jesus who is kind and merciful, is also the one who has great expectations of us, who wants us to stay with him, who wants us to keep walking life's journey with him, who wants us to not only hear his words, but also to heed them, who wants us to not only receive him in Holy Communion, but to renew our friendship with him every time we receive him, and to re-commit ourselves to following him with faith, hope and love. Did not this very same Jesus say: 'From those to whom much has been given, much will be required?'

bgleesoncp@gmail.com