

Sermon SSC Synod 2019

All Hallows Gospel Oak

S Vincent DePaul

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36

Matthew 9:35-38

³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

What a jolly start: Harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. It is something that we can sometimes empathise with only too well. Even if not all of the time, some of the time ministry can hang heavy.

And 'twas ever thus. Remember George Herbert's poem The Collar: "I struck the board and cried no more, I will away".

And this is one of the reasons why in the church we are more and more being invited to talk about well-being.

There is a profound uneasiness amongst Catholics around this sort of language. I used to say to my curates that the priesthood of the Catholic Church is a life led and not a job done. But we appear to be being moved from what we understand of priesthood, legally encapsulated the idea that we are an office holder, to the idea that we are employees.

We seem to be moving from a world in which, ideally, duties are joyfully undertaken by independent clergy into one in which we have rights but in return are given objectives and targets, and if we miss them we might be managed out by people like archdeacons. We are harassed and dejected.

And to our shock we find that there are clergy who are counting the hours, working two sessions out of three, and – gulp – talking seriously about taking two days off a week. And even more to our shock we find that maybe they have a point, as we see people burnt out and tired. Harassed and dejected.

More invidiously perhaps questions are asked about why a retired priest in his 80s would want a PTO any longer, as surely he is not functioning any more, and it would not be right for his wellbeing for us to ask him to do so.

This culture change is happening around us. And much as we all like a good grumble it makes us feel harassed, dejected, sheep without a shepherd.

Most clergy I know are either workaholics or layabouts. More the former than the latter, it is true, but either way we need to get a balance.

Serenhedd James has drawn attention in his brand-new book on the Cowley Fathers to the profound connection between the vision of S Vincent de Paul for a community of Mission Priests, and the vision of Fr Benson in the founding of the Society of S John the Evangelist, which had such deep links with the development of our Society of the Holy Cross. Priests, formed in missional service of the poor, following Christ who led His disciples on the mission around the towns and villages because the people were harassed and dejected, sheep without a shepherd.

Fr Benson taught therefore that the key to wellbeing is, oddly from the perspective of the world, poverty. Poverty which is modelled for us by Christ who was stripped, emptied, poor upon the cross. This is teaching to resonate to us, soldiers of the cross.

Poverty wrote Benson, demands taking care of what we have to use, so in this case taking care of the bodies of our workers.

We cannot afford wasted lives. So I must enjoin great economy in this respect under the vow of poverty. As you would take care of a piano, or a handsome piece of school furniture, or a chasuble, so you must take care of the priest.

Benson went on to emphasise the need to do what is possible, not what is impossible: “*We must try to live upon as little as is possible, [which is to embrace poverty] but it must be a real trial as to what is possible, not a determination to do what is impossible. And such a trial hinges upon ... consideration of the things for which our strength is wanted, prudent and wise choices as to what will do the work of sustaining us best at the least cost, temperance in not making any trial rashly, [not being too harsh] and fortitude in not doing it timidly [not being too lax]*”

You know me, and you know that it is never long before I mention Father Congreve. He is even clearer about the need to focus on Christ lifted up, this being the way in which we can get the balance in our lives that we need.

Congreve wrote that it is only when we come to the one who was lifted up for us that we can cope with the dejection and harassment life, what he calls the “busy life of duty.” “*The*

Lord's remedy for the over-strain of our life is not 'arrange your work better,' or 'work harder,' or 'give up your holiday.' No, but 'come on to me, and I will give you rest.'" Congreve did not teach repose, but refreshment: *"Christ could not be the companion of an idle desultory life; the idler must live under the perpetual curse of depression and bad conscience."*

With S Augustine we know that the call of the Christian, of the priest, lays on our hearts the charge to serve the gospel, and it gnaws at us if unanswered, such that we cannot find peace – wellbeing - until we find our peace in Him. So Congreve observes that even if we are busy about the externals of church work, if we are not working for Christ then we will *"worry.... working with an uneasy conscience, dragging along a chain of responsibilities not fully faced, duties neglected, and [suffering] a feeling of despair of ever getting one's work and oneself right."* The medicine for this 'spiritual dry rot' is not simply a break. *"It was very likely not change of air I wanted, or relaxation from work, when the doctor said I needed rest; it was another need which mere cessation of work does not supply."* Refreshment comes from sharing work with Christ, working with and for Him. This was the teaching of S Vincent; taken up by Fr Benson and the SSJE, and lived by the

fathers of our own Society which drew so closely on them both.

They were harassed and dejected. We will not find wellbeing if we secularise our work or if we romanticise it. We can be satisfied neither with wellbeing driven priorities which replace the prophetic with the therapeutic, nor by a false heroism in which we work ourselves to death.

We need food for the journey, grace by which we can find this balance, come to Christ whose burden is light, the shepherd of our souls and the true leader of our mission. Mission priests in the heritage of S Vincent begin therefore always at the altar, and the first steps of our missionary journey are up the hill to the sanctuary there to feed again on the body and blood offered for us on the cross. There we receive the presence of our Shepherd, and no longer harassed and dejected we can go out to proclaim Him to the world.

Therefore to that feast let us now once again turn.