

Serendipity

At the youth camp I attended recently we were discussing our favourite words. The young people came up with words like 'hoola hoop', 'Caribbean', 'hypochondriac', 'fluffy', and 'oxymoron'. Do you have a favourite word? Mine is 'serendipity'. It has a lovely, playful, silky, sensuous feel to it, but it also has a particular meaning that describes those occasions when something happens just at the right time, quite by chance. This week there was an example of it, though, in a sense, it was not a happy chance and in some ways what I am going to say today is even harder than what I was speaking of in the homily last week.

Over the past year and a half I have been privileged to welcome back to the faith a number of families and individuals whose lives and misfortunes have led them away from the Church only to find their way back here through happy chances, indeed, through serendipity. I don't take any credit for this because it was not I who led them back but, again, serendipitous chance meetings or events and, of course, the work of the Holy Spirit.

In one case, sickness and serious illness led someone to seek solace in the Church; they found it and stayed after having been put off the Church through unfortunate events in the past. In two other cases it was the curiosity of a child wanting to know what goes on here that led a family to attend one Sunday and to find a welcome that persuaded them to stay and resume the practise of the faith they had drifted away from in teenage years. In a number of other cases, it was the desire to have an irregular marriage situation corrected that led to a return to practice. And there are others with their own particular stories. I hope I don't embarrass anyone by mentioning this, but I think it is something to be celebrated, to rejoice about and to thank God for. And it is a tribute to the love and fellowship of this community that people returning tentatively find a welcome here that makes them want to stay.

So it was particularly disappointing to meet one of those families this week who had not met with the kind of reception one should expect of a community calling itself Christian like this one. On two separate occasions they had been told to move from the seats they had occupied because 'that's where I sit' and on another occasion, someone told them to walk round the other end of a bench because they didn't want to let them pass.

I have to tell you I was appalled, ashamed and shocked that this sort of attitude should find a place in this community, and I was deeply embarrassed on behalf of the newcomers who had seriously considered leaving and not coming back. Because I was aware of the struggle and the journey they had undergone to come back to the practice

of the faith, I was also very angry, and I still am. I am only glad they had the sense to talk to me about this rather than just get up and leave for good.

Some time ago I preached a homily on the injustice and iniquity of the system in place in my home parish when I was a child where, long before I was born, people could pay for a seat in church and have their name put on the back so that no one else could sit there. The more you were prepared to pay, the nearer to the altar you could sit and everyone else could admire your exalted status. Those who couldn't pay were relegated to sit right at the back of the church behind a low wall separating them from the pew-payers. I think we can all agree that system is unjust, insulting, discriminatory and deeply unchristian.

So, let me be quite clear about one thing. In this church there are no reserved seats, except for a special occasions when some benches will be reserved for a particular reason: for the family at a funeral, for a married couple celebrating a special anniversary, for a baptism family, and so on. Otherwise, there are only two people who have their own seat in this church: I'm one, the organist is the other and, of course, the choir and the servers have designated places in order to fulfil their ministry. The church gets pretty full at times, but never that full that, if someone is sitting where you like to sit, you can't find somewhere else in the church to take a seat even if it means coming down to the front while the Mass is in progress. We are all creatures of habit and have our routines and favourite places to sit, but it doesn't hurt occasionally to be moved out of our comfort zone and to reflect on what is more important: to have our backside warming a particular spot on a bench or to make another person feel like an outcast and a nuisance.

I told the person who mentioned this to me that I would say something about it today but I wasn't sure where and how it would fit. Imagine my surprise when I looked at the readings. St James is roundly condemning some Christian communities for operating a class system among those who attend Mass, giving the best places to the rich and celebrities and showing them smarmy deference while treating the poor with contempt and disdain and making them sit on the floor. That this reading should come up today when I wanted to speak about this very subject, that's real serendipity!

St James says, "brethren, do not try to combine faith in Christ Jesus, our glorified Lord, with the making of distinctions between classes of people" and he applies this specifically to when people come to celebrate the Eucharist. The psalm reminds us that God is the friend in a particular way of the poor, the outcast, the hungry, the oppressed, the widow and orphan and the stranger. In the bible tradition, welcome for the stranger is regarded as a measure of the extent and depth to which God's people have taken his word to heart. In the Book of Deuteronomy, God reminds his people that they must love and welcome the stranger because they were themselves were once strangers in a foreign land.

We have all been in situations where we have been strangers and not known anyone. When people shun us, ignore us and pass us by, we feel deeply unwanted. However, when someone comes over and speaks to us and introduces us to others and takes the trouble to talk to us and take an interest in us, we feel wanted and valued and respected. This is how it should be in this community. Anyone you see who looks like newcomer, or unsure of themselves, or a stranger or a visitor from another parish, please be sure to make them feel welcome for this is the test of the maturity of any Christian community. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes:

Continue to love one another, and remember always to welcome strangers, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:1)

And, by a happy chance, indeed, by serendipity, welcoming the stranger will also guarantee us our place with the Lord in heaven:

Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For...I was a stranger and you made me welcome..."

And then the just will say to him in reply, "Lord, when did we see you...a stranger and welcome you?...And the King will answer, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me". (Matthew 25: 37, 38, 40)