

Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: a blessing if you obey the commands of God, a curse if you disobey.”
Deuteronomy 11, 26-27

“People are justified by faith, not by doing something the Law tells them to do.”
Romans 3, 28

“It is not those who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”
Matthew 7, 21-27



There's a delightful children's book called *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. It was written and illustrated by Eric Carle. By his own admission, Carle had a very difficult childhood and adolescence: “When I was six, the world seemed a cold and confusing place, except for one thing - a picture of a cityscape at night - red brick buildings with darkened windows, except for one, exploding with the joyful colours of a Christmas tree. The picture faced my bed, and every night I fell asleep comforted by the warmth of that bright tree in the dark night. The picture was the work of an art director at my father's job. Once, my father took me to work, and even though I was so shy I could barely speak, the art director smiled as if he understood everything about me, and it was okay. He smiled and he opened the drawer of his drafting table - a treasure trove of coloured drawing pencils. ‘You can use them all,’ he said. I had no language for what I felt, but today I would call it Grace.” Eric Carle has written and illustrated over seventy children's books which he describes as “an attempt to build the gap between home and school, safety and the unknown.”

I find all three readings for today somewhat disturbing. They focus on observing God's law. The gospel readings of the last few weeks have concentrated on different parts of Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew stresses observance of the new law outlined by Jesus in that famous Sermon on the Mount. However, he points out that it's not sufficient just to proclaim we are followers of Jesus. We have to put our money where our mouth is. It doesn't matter that we might be able to prophesy or drive out devils or even miraculously cure people. We have also to live with integrity and justice and compassion for others. Going to Mass every Sunday, contributing to parish collections, participating in retreats and missions and taking out subscriptions to devotional magazines can all amount to artificial religiosity unless we take to heart and put into practice what Jesus spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount. And that means the hard work of deciding each day as we go about our business what actions and practices and structures are best going to embody and translate into action the message of Jesus.

We've all met people who seem to get their security from abiding by the letter of the law. They seem incapable of tolerating any departure from what is set down in rituals and codes of practice. Change and creativity are anathema. Some even appoint themselves as guardians of orthodoxy, recording for anyone who will take notice the errors of celebrants who depart from strict liturgical norms. Sadly, they fail to see that Christianity is based on relationship with Jesus and his Father which overflows to all of the people who come into our lives. And that relationship is nourished first and foremost by prayer. Through prayer we come to realize that God wants to be known for who God is, without being misrepresented or having his identity massaged into something we might like it to be. Prayer is about growing into being sensitive to God and responding by being the best selves that we can as we come to appreciate just how sensitive God is to each of us. Prayer is about building and nourishing a relationship with God in which both we and God attend to each other's best interests. To my way of thinking, that seems to have very little to do with lists of rules and religious hoops through which to jump. And that's the point Paul makes in the second reading: Legal observance and literalism are, of themselves, restrictive and stifling. Faith is what matters, and prayer is integral to faith in God. With practice, prayer gets to be very personal. However, if we engage in it with some regularity, God will not be able to claim that we're strangers.

The relationship we grow into with God is in turn reflected in the way we relate to others. And that's where the story of Eric Carle and his chance meeting with the art director comes in. Through a very simple encounter and an invitation to share in a collection of coloured pencils, a shy child's life was transformed and a creativity was released that has brought sunshine and joy to countless children around the world. The Gospel can be brought to life in the simplest and most surprising of ways.