

Homily 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

There is a scene in one of those Indiana Jones movies, the third one about the Holy Grail, in which Indiana Jones, the famous archaeologist, is in a cave with the film's baddie, a Nazi collaborator. They are surrounded by row upon row of chalices, only one of which is the true grail. The baddie has been wanting to get his hands on the grail for years because he believes it will bring eternal life in the sense that he would never die a physical death to this world. He is advised by the guardian of the grail that he must choose wisely: the real grail would bring life but the false grail would bring death. OK, well, it is a silly plot but I am sure you can guess what happens next. His choice is made on the superficial beauty of the chalice: it is richly ornate and made of solid gold (he seemed to have overlooked the fact that it was also quite clearly made sometime in the eighteenth century in the baroque manner and not in first century Palestine). For those who know about these things, like theological college students and clergy, you could plainly see that it wasn't a chalice at all but a ciborium (the vessel to put the Hosts in) because it had a ridge on the top for a lid, but no matter. Anyway it is the wrong one; and he drinks from it and dies horribly.

Indiana on the other hand uses his knowledge of first century artefacts to identify a more likely candidate and, surprise, surprise, makes the right choice. But his motives were different, as well. He

was trying to obtain the grail, not for his own glory, but to save his father, outside, and wounded by a bullet. The baddie, of course, was totally consumed by his selfish greed. It was this that guided his choice. Betrayed by his own ignorance, led on by his selfish desires, the man who wanted to live forever dies in the pursuit of a false dream. The one who cares nothing for his own safety and motivated only by his concern for another is the one who makes the right choice.

Today's first reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus makes a similar point. 'He has set fire and water before you; put out your hand to whichever you prefer. Man has life and death before him: whichever a man likes better will be given him'.

Does that sound odd to you? Surely, you will reply, people always want to choose life over death, don't they? Surely you would prefer to put your hand in water rather than the flame, wouldn't you?

Unfortunately, nothing is ever quite that simple. People have a great ability to allow their own selfishness to get in the way. Too many people lose sight of what's really important in our world. Jesus spells it out with great clarity and simplicity in the Gospel. For virtue to be real, it must go deep, deeper in fact than the Pharisees and scribes, who thought of themselves as the brand leaders in virtue. It is one thing to avoid actually doing something that infringes the law but Jesus calls for more. What he wants is a virtue that ensures, not only

clean hands, but clean hearts. To that extent, Jesus is not only upholding the principle of Law, he is intensifying it. Not enough to avoid adultery, then. Even a lustful look is enough.

But the first reading reminds us that fidelity to the commandments is possible. We may not be able to do this in our own strength. But grace, the free gift of God to all who submit to him in faith, enables us to rise above our earthly contradictions and frailties, to transcend them and be caught up into a new life. Today, through Water and Spirit, three children will be born again. In a moment we will bless first of all our new Font and the prayer which we will use reminds us that, through Baptism, the doors of paradise are once again thrown open, the stain of original sin washed away. The prayer reminds us that 'the lamp of faith spreads the holy light that banishes darkness from the mind and fills those who are reborn here with heavenly gifts'. Finally, the prayers asks that those who are baptised may 'fulfill in their actions what they pledge by their faith.'

That is the key to what we are doing today. Today, in Baptism, we give these children a precious gift: the stain of sin is washed away and a new life of faith is opened up. It is for their parents and Godparents to sustain them as they grow in that faith, to show them by their words and example what it means to live the Christian life. The Gospel demands are both joyful and exacting: high standards are expected of the Christian disciple. We are keen, quite rightly, to

stress the wonderful mercy and love of our Lord. But today he reveals a sterner side and this, too, must be part of our Christian awareness. The same Jesus who calls to him those who labour and are overburdened in order that they may find rest is the same Jesus who calls us to a life of virtue deeper and truer than that of the Pharisees and scribes.

But above all, Jesus does not make demands without giving the means by which those demands can be met. Grace is given in Baptism, strengthened by Confirmation and nourished by his Body and Blood in the Mass. Add to this a life of prayer and a love of Sacred Scripture and you have the whole armour of light which protects us, shields us and enables us to be strong in the Lord.

As we bless the font now, and bring to new birth those who have come for baptism, let us all renew our pledge to faithful, both in word and deed, in action and in thought, to the standards that Jesus sets before us today.