

## *26 Year A - Our Potential for Good*

One of the happiest memories that I have of my father and of my childhood is the occasion when he taught me how to ride a bike. Running alongside he kept a firm grip on the saddle to help me overcome the inevitable wobbling, and to become increasingly confident and make steady progress forward.

Obviously my balance was very precarious! I had the innate ability to achieve a stable, upright position – but at any moment there was the risk of toppling over and coming a cropper on the roadside.

Our spiritual journey is a similar mix of constant vulnerability and great potential.

Certainly we always need to remember how precarious is our virtue! The old proverb reminds us: *pride goes before a fall*. If we become complacent, self-satisfied, presumptuous; if we think we have outgrown temptation and left it behind then we are being very foolish. Such an attitude will result sooner or later in our humiliation - we will be brought down to earth with a bump!

In the Gospel we see over and over again how critical Jesus is of those who regard themselves as virtuous – he reserves his strongest words for them. Today's parable is in part a criticism of those who think themselves beyond reproach, as models of excellence, as superior to their fellows.

Any one of us can succumb to temptation and fall from grace at any moment: *The upright man renounces his integrity to commit sin* (1 Reading, Ezekiel). It is all too easy for us to move from the ways of goodness which lead to life, and slip into the ways of sin - in which we begin to die, little by little, as persons. As the prophet says: *The sinner dies because of the evil that he himself has committed*.

If we remain up straight then it is surely because of the loving hand of our Father in heaven.

There is another side to the teaching of the Scriptures today, *viz.* the great **potential** in each of us to rise out of our innate sinfulness and to grow in virtue. No matter how often we may have fallen, we can still persevere in our efforts - until being upright comes 'more naturally'.

Just as anyone, however virtuous, can fall into sin, so anyone, no matter how sinful, can make a fresh start. A change of heart is always possible by God's grace. No one is invulnerable, but no one is irredeemable either. If the Scriptures warn us of the danger of complacency then they also give us encouragement if our failures have 'laid us low'.

We can become depressed by a sense of our sinfulness. Perhaps we have done something that we ourselves regard as unforgivable. Perhaps we find it hard to accept the kind of person that we are. We may see ourselves continually falling short of the Gospel ideals in one way or another. We may feel that we have wandered so far away from God that we can never return home to Him.

If we haven't known this for ourselves then perhaps we know about other people who are angry or sick with themselves, weary of trying, fast losing hope. It is a wretched plight to be in.

The Scriptures assure us: *The sinner can renounce his sin to become law-abiding and honest. He deserves to live and he certainly shall live* (1 Reading).

What matters is not our human failings but where our heart lies. If we desire to be one with God and living aright, no matter what we have done wrong in the past, no matter what the confusion and weakness of the present, the Lord promises new beginnings.

Like the first son in the Gospel story we can **all** *think better of it* – our erstwhile waywardness can become our present and future responsiveness to God's will. We can move away from the things that lead to misery and spiritual death and into the ways that lead to life and lasting happiness.

St Paul invites us to be sympathetic towards each other. Such a disposition is only sensible – at any moment we could fall as others have fallen. Moreover, in addition to the help of God's grace, we can also be assisted into an upright position by the gentle hand of others. We should make allowances for one another's inexperience and human frailty and offer mutual support if we are to be able to make steady progress on the 'road to heaven'.