

12th Sunday of Year

One of the most wonderful discoveries in the field of genetics in recent times has been that of DNA, and the gradual unravelling of its mysteries even if so much more remains to be discovered. DNA is a remarkable blueprint of God's creative power in each one of us. Except for identical twins, our DNA is unique, and shapes what we will become. At the same time it determines that we are part of the human race, and links us with our ancestors, since some elements are passed on unchanged from one generation to the next. The common link with the British Royal family made it possible to identify the remains of the Russian Royal family.

Some years ago there was a programme on television that traced back an inherited disease to a particular individual in a Scandinavian village in the Seventeenth Century. All sufferers were descended from him, and there was no record of any earlier appearance of this condition. He had been born with some small mutation in his genetic make-up that had passed on down the generations.

In our second reading today St Paul tells us something similar about sin. How can it be that all human beings end up disobeying God, if we were intended to live in harmony with him? Is it just a question of everyone following a bad example, or is there a more fundamental problem? The view we take affects how we see the role of Jesus. Is he just sent by God as a teacher and a good example – a mentor in today's jargon? Has he been sent to transform us from within – salvation in the language of the Church?

St Paul tells us that sin entered the world through one man, with the result that everyone sins. Friendship and harmony with God is broken, and the result is death. He also tells us that divine grace comes to us through one person, Jesus Christ, as a free gift, and that this reconciles us with God, and renews us from within. We call these events Original Sin and Salvation or Redemption. The first sin was a personal act of rebellion against God by our first human ancestors. We are not responsible for their sin, but it had consequences for us. Original Sin is like a genetic mutation. It means we have an inherited weakness that will eventually show itself when we too choose to disobey God. Only Our Lady has been exempted from this defect in view of her part in God's plan, and that too is a special gift from God through Christ, but given in a special way.

We know that some genetic defects can be repaired through a bone marrow transplant. This repairs the damage to the individual, but does not prevent the mutation being passed on. Christ came, as it were, to give us a bone marrow transplant. The grace he gives us restores us from within, and brings us back to harmony and friendship with God. It makes us possible for us to live lives free from sin. We do need him as a teacher and example but what he has done for us is much more powerful and transforming than this.

Sadly we are not freed from the temptation that faced our first ancestors, and we can still choose to commit personal sin. A certain weakness remains. This is why Our Lord has given us the Sacraments. Through Baptism he gives us this spiritual bone marrow transplant, cleansing us from Original Sin and filling us with grace. Through the sacrament of penance he reconciles and heals us again and again when we fail. Through the Eucharist he feeds and strengthens us. This is why the Church insists on the importance of parents bringing their children for baptism at an early age, and their responsibility to ensure that they are prepared for First Confession and Holy Communion when they can understand and are ready for them. It is not simply a question of free choice in the matter of religion when they are old enough, but of their spiritual health and wellbeing as they grow up.