

St Annibale Feast Day Homily

Eucharist Celebration

at FDZ Chapel, Richmond

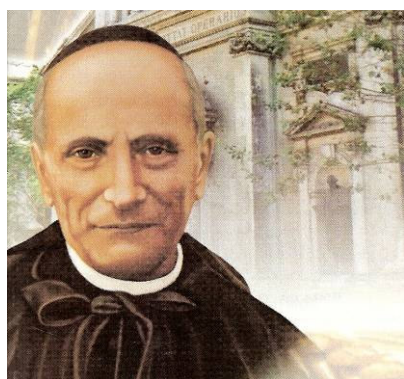
"The harvest is abundant," Jesus says. The harvest is rich; the harvest is plentiful. What evidence does Jesus have for saying this? It would seem, on the surface, that there is very little evidence. He has been moving around, preaching and curing illness - he is well aware of the need for people to hear the good news, to be given hope, to be healed of all that ails them, to be freed from their burdens. He sees the crowds - this mass of humanity, harassed, destitute and scattered, dejected, stressed. Jesus sees what we see - a mass of humanity, sick, possessed, stressed, overburdened, sad.



But where we tend to see an overwhelming problem, an impossible or intractable situation, Jesus sees something else, something far more positive. He sees potential - a harvest!

The difference between what Jesus sees and what we see is that we tend to see only what is visible, what appears on the surface. Jesus sees more deeply, and so he sees two things that we can miss. Firstly, he sees hearts and souls that are thirsting - that are thirsting for God, the living God. He sees beneath our rejection of God, beneath our indifference to God, beneath our clinging to things which are not God, and sees our thirst, our hunger, our restlessness for God. He sees, not bad people, but broken people, sick people - sick in their hearts, sick in their souls, yearning for a shepherd to gather them and show them the way. And his response is to have compassion.

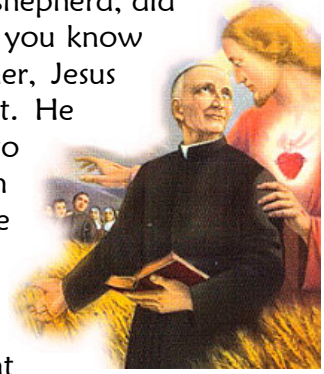
But secondly, Jesus sees that the harvest is plentiful because he sees that there is *already* a Labourer at work in those hearts. Before he asks his disciples to pray for labourers, before he sends out labourers himself, as he does in the next passage, Jesus knows that much labour has already been done - that God is already labouring in the lives of these helpless sheep. "My Father is still working and so am I" (John 5:17) It is an image St Ignatius uses - of God labouring in the world, labouring for us in every moment and every situation. It is this vision - of a people in deep need and a God who labours for them - that enables Jesus to see a ready harvest.



St Annibale Maria saw the world with these same eyes, with the eyes of Jesus. We recall his work in the Avignone slum, where he found great poverty and destitution. People told him it was pointless to try to work there - even the people in the slum told him this. The situation was too desperate, the needs too great. Annibale was not blind - he saw the desperate need, as we would see it. But, like Jesus, he also saw deeper - he saw the hunger of people for God, even if they themselves were not aware of it, and he saw a God who was already labouring there in their midst. And so, like Jesus, he saw not a problem, but a harvest waiting to be reaped.

What Saint Annibale Maria does next takes us to our second point. While he realised that God was at work there already, he was not content to simply go home and pray that God would continue to work. He realised that God chooses to work in powerful ways through human agents. He knew that people need to have God's love for them, God's labour for them, embodied in human form. He asked one of the blind beggars from that slum what he knew about God. The man replied: "What can I say? I never learned about Him." Annibale took this as a call from God to visit this man, and he promised to do so. He chose to be a co-worker with God, to be Christ's presence for this man and for that whole slum area. He realised that Christ is present now through his body, the Church - that he has no hands but ours - that he labours in a powerful way through the labourers sent into the harvest.

In this point, once more, St Annibale Maria had the mind of Christ, seeing things as Jesus saw them. Jesus, having seen the crowds and noticing that they needed a shepherd, did not say, "Okay, I'll be your shepherd and all will be okay" or "Well, you know God is your shepherd", as Ezekiel tells us in the first reading. Rather, Jesus immediately tells his disciples to *pray* for labourers for the harvest. He points to the need for people to labour with him and in his name - to continue his presence in the world. It is the same message we get from the story of the loaves and the fishes. There is a great need - the hunger of the large crowd. Jesus could have simply created food for them all to eat. But he asks the disciples what resources *they* have. He chooses to make use of the small things they are able to provide - 5 loaves and 2 fish. And he also asks them to distribute the food that he is miraculously multiplying. His way is to work with and through us - to invite us to be co-workers, co-labourers, in mission.



So, to come back to today's Gospel, we read that, straight after he sees the needs of the crowd, like sheep without a shepherd, he calls his disciples to pray for labourers. And then he goes on to send out his apostles. To do what? To do precisely what he has been doing - to be his co-workers. We heard at the start of the reading that Jesus was "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom" (Mt 9:35). He now sends his apostles, telling them, "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" (Mt 10:7). We heard that Jesus was "curing every disease and every sickness" (Mt 9:35). Now he gives the apostles "authority ... to cure every disease and every sickness" (Mt 10:1). Jesus recognises that the crowds are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36). Now he sends his apostles with instructions to go "to the lost sheep" (Mt 10:6). Jesus' mission, Jesus' labours for humanity, are to be carried out by co-missionaries, co-labourers, co-workers in the harvest, doing exactly as he himself has done.

And that takes us to our final point. Jesus tells the disciples to ask for labourers for the harvest and then he sends the disciples themselves into the harvest. They are not *simply* to ask for labourers - they are to labour themselves. This once more was very much the way of St Annibale Maria. He both asked for labourers, and he laboured himself. He went into the harvest to work with Christ, and he recognised the need to be obedient to Christ's call to pray for more labourers. He was not content simply to labour himself. As fruitful as his own efforts were, he knew that the needs were far greater than one person could handle, or one congregation or group. He was not content for his work to finish when he died; he knew the need for long-term mission, and for good work to be carried on in further generations. He knew that when one worker passed on, it was important to have others to take his place. And so he prayed for vocations. But even here, he did not simply pray - he prayed himself, and he laboured to establish two congregations devoted to prayer for vocations, the Rogationists and our dear Daughters of Divine Zeal who have laboured and prayed so long, including 50 years here in Australia.



We too are called to follow the example of Christ, and the particular example of Christ-like living which we have seen in Saint Annibale Maria. We are called, as Saint Annibale was - not simply to ask, but also to labour - to labour in the fields ourselves, whatever our particular vocation and field are. And not simply to labour, but also to ask for more labourers, for labourers sufficient to the size of the harvest, which is enormous. We are called to work with Christ - each of us in our own way, depending on our calling, our particular vocation in life. And part of our labour is - as Christ commanded us to do - to pray for labourers in this plentiful harvest. In this Eucharist, we pray that we may grow to have a share in St Annibale

Maria's zeal for vocations. That we may see, as he did, as Jesus did, that "the fields are ripe for harvesting" (John 4:35), and that we may recognise this harvesting for what it truly is - nothing less than "gathering fruit for eternal life" (John 4:36). Amen.

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