

25A

The great French dramatist Jean Anouilh, in one of his plays, describes a dramatic scene outside the gates of Heaven. The faithful are all gathered with their tickets at the pearly gates. They feel assured of admission and are waiting impatiently for the gates to open. On the fringe of the crowd is a small bedraggled group who have no tickets and are heavily dependent on the goodness of God to gain admission to Paradise. A rumour begins to circulate among the ticket holders. 'Did you hear that he is letting them in too? Well! I don't believe it - after all we did'. Incredulity gives way to resentment which in turn boils over into anger. They begin to shout in protest and blaspheme against God and at that very moment they're all damned.

Did you know that in the early centuries of the Church heresies were quite frequent, but one of the most virulent was that known as Pelagianism. Pelagius was an ex-priest who spread it about that you can get to Heaven on your own steam - you didn't need the grace of God at all - will power alone was sufficient.

Do we not come across strains of this heresy today from people who believe man has come of age and he doesn't need God anymore? They imply that religion should have no place in the classroom, the boardroom, the bedroom, the sick-room.

Remnants of Pelagianism can also be felt among church-going people. It has the effect of consigning to the second or even third division all those who are heavily dependent on the grace of God for forgiveness, healing and ultimate salvation.

The heresy was eventually condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

However it's not gone away. How many of us would like to tell God what to do and reserve his mercy for so called 'deserving' people. We might be tempted to think that the people who find God at the eleventh hour should be at the back of the cue as far as His mercy is concerned. That doesn't at all mean that those who come in the early morning are less favoured than those who come later in the day. But we are not meant to make comparisons or judge as to who is worthy or unworthy of God's love. Only God knows the inmost heart of anyone.

Life is full of surprises and so also is the Gospel. How many so called 'undeserving' people do we find in the ministry of Jesus who were written off by the self-righteous religious elite of His day? Examples which immediately spring to mind are: Zachaeus, the unscrupulous tax collector, who was over-joyed when Jesus opted to stay at his house, the good thief who at the 11th hour asked Jesus to remember Him in His kingdom, the Canaanite women who wouldn't take 'no' for an answer despite repeated rebuffs and the Prodigal Son who returned to his father late in the day and was overwhelmed by His reception, much to the ire of his elder brother who was jealous of the reception his sibling received. "Why be envious because God is generous"

So, we rejoice with those who have turned back to God whether it be at the sixth, ninth or eleventh hour. God is unstinting with his mercy if we give him half a chance to dispense it.