

Homily for The Twenty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) (03/09/23)

St Paul begs the Christians in Rome to worship God in a way that is 'worthy of thinking beings'. He wants to encourage in them a deep sense of reflectiveness, a refusal to settle for what is superficial. He doesn't want them just to get caught up in what everybody else is doing or saying, in the fad of the moment, he wants them to enter deeply into reality. He continues: 'Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind'. So, don't just get caught up in what other people are doing around you, in following the crowd; don't let your actions be governed by things outside you. Instead, be reflective, go deeper, allow the new mind that you have in Christ, your knowledge of the mystery, your access to all that is real and deep, to govern what you do. Take control of your own life, reflect and act on what goes on in your minds, not on the basis of what you see outside you. And well he might have given them that advice. The ancient world, for all the wisdom and learning it had, could also be cruel and life was often seen as cheap. Not much has changed. We know a great deal more about the way the world works, but we often use it no better than the ancients did. We can be vain, proud, cruel, trivial, selfish, greedy – and if we want to be wise, to live well, we need to be aware of this and to take control of our lives by acting according to what our renewed minds tell us, not simply what we see around us.

St Peter illustrates this perfectly in the Gospel reading. Only minutes ago he had a moment of inspiration and proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ. Now he has gone back to superficial thinking. He acts as if Jesus was some sort of political leader, or a prophet; he tries to solve the problems they face as if God did not exist: 'This mustn't happen to you!' No, no, no! You are acting just like the Roman soldiers and the political leaders all around you. You need to go deeper. You need to slip yourself into the great story of God's love and mercy for his people, and from that place look at where you are. In that great story we see what happens to the prophets. Like Jeremiah they find themselves sat in the stocks with rotten vegetables running down their faces while everybody laughs at them. Jeremiah has refused to be superficial. He has refused to be anaesthetised by the crowd's refusal to face reality. He has told them the truth, because he feels he cannot keep it inside, and it has brought nothing but laughter and ridicule. Why does St Peter think it will be any different for Jesus?

Deep within each one of us is a thirst, a longing, for meaning, a longing to know that life has significance, that it is not all in vain, not all pointless, that our lives are a part, however small, of a great story. We can either choose to listen to this sense of longing, or we can try and suppress it and ignore it. We can never, however, extinguish it, it will always be there. It can be very tempting to try and shout it down, try and act as if it didn't exist – especially if we don't really know what to do with this longing, how to direct it. In those circumstances it can be troubling and unsettling, and so we allow ourselves to live life on the surface, pursuing easy pleasures even if, deep down, we know that in the context of eternity they don't amount to much. This was what St Peter was doing; frightened by the Lord's prophecy of his own suffering, he rebels. He forgets the great story, the way in which those who speak deep truth always seem to face opposition, and he acts as if there were no search story, no such reality, and so he is seduced by the superficial: 'no, lets not do that, lets act as if it were

not so!' St Paul would have said he had forgotten the renewing of his mind, and that he was allowing himself to be directed by the behaviour of the people around him.

To be fully human is to live in contact with deep reality, to be reflective and thoughtful. There are plenty of times for us to have a laugh and to enjoy ourselves, but wisdom tells us that there are some things that are too important for this, some decisions that need us to go deep. These are the moments when we need to put aside all the noise and the clamour of the world around us, the knowledge of what the crowd is doing, and look at life from a different angle. Faced with this question, this issue, I need to remind myself of the great story: God has created everything, and he has created it for glory; every human being is infinitely precious and has within them the capacity for greatness; life contains many challenges, and we find meaning by facing them and conquering them (while avoiding them means nothing at all); human history is the story of countless individuals trying to live life well, to make the everyday world more like the kingdom of God; every tiny triumph is another line written in this great story. If Peter had remembered this, instead of getting caught up in a fantasy world without God, he would have said: 'Yes, Lord, this frightens us and it must frighten you, too, but we will be there, we will stand by you and we will learn'.

'Life yields only to the conqueror' (Dag Hammarskjold, 'Markings'). We can surrender, and choose to live superficially, but we need to know that such an anaesthetising of our deeper selves will gradually take us over completely, and turn that thirst for meaning into little more than a nagging memory. Or we can choose to live deeply, to be thinking beings, to be reflective, to distinguish the passing fun (which is fine in itself, of course) from the hugely important, and judge everything around us by our renewed minds, renewed by constant contact with that great story of God's love for his people.

The world desperately needs people who are wise enough to enjoy life, to be able to have a bit of a laugh, but also to see when things are very serious, to reflect on them in the light of deep truth, deep reality, and to refuse to live always and only on the surface.