

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 25th June 2023

Today's Gospel reading continues the speech that Jesus was making last Sunday. He has called his 12 co-workers to him; he is instructing them, equipping them with the wisdom that they will need to go out and share the love of God, and then he will send them out. There is some important advice for them today: 'Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; fear him rather who can destroy both body and soul on hell'. Our bodies are beautiful things, precious things, created out of love by God, created as the means by which we share his love with the world, and receive love from one another; it is a glorious thing, the human body. But it is not the ultimate good, to be preserved at all costs. To preserve our bodies at the cost of losing our souls would be a great tragedy. Every one of us combines body and soul – the soul is the spiritual reality of every human person, it means that there is more to me (and to every human being) than meets the eye; there is a place within where the image of God takes its place, and it is that place, not the physical body, that must be protected at all costs.

This is quite a difficult truth to take on board. Jesus is saying to his companions that their physical comfort, their physical wellbeing, even their physical being itself, is not an ultimate value to be preserved come-what-may. Physical comfort is a perfectly reasonable thing to enjoy. No sensible person would choose discomfort and pain if they could be avoided. But Jesus says to his disciples that there will be times when they have to make decisions that will lead them to lose their physical comforts, and even their health or their lives. This is very hard for our culture to take on – even harder, perhaps, than it was in Jesus' day. Our culture views the pursuit of comfort, even of luxury, and pleasure as a defining goal. It finds it very hard indeed to accept it when someone surrenders their own comfort, or security, when someone makes a decision that has drastic negative material and financial consequences, for the sake of conscience.

Jeremiah knew all about this. He has been proclaiming the dire consequences to come as a result of the nation's foolishness and faithlessness, and the people are ridiculing him. For the sake of speaking the truth, he is jeered and laughed at. He refuses to be 'seduced into error' even if it means his reputation is in tatters and his friends desert him. He knows that he must preserve his soul, the place within him where he encounters the living God, whatever the cost.

The reality is that, however much our culture may be addicted to comfort and luxury, there will always be moments when we must say 'This is too much, this is going too far, this I will not do'. On some level we know this, of course, although we hope it will happen to someone else, not to us. But there is something dangerous here. When the moment comes that a momentous decision must be made (which may well not be a life or death decision, but momentous all the same: should I leave this organisation? Should I resign from my job? Should I confront a friend?) will we be properly equipped to act wisely and justly? As we just hope it will go away, are we missing out on the need to invest deeply in the hard work of forming and educating our conscience, so that we can judge rightly when to act, when to speak, when to risk our comfort?

Jennifer Bryson served as a lead interrogator at Guantanamo Bay between 2004 and 2006¹. As soon as she took up her role she received requests from other interrogators to use, shall we say, non-standard interrogation techniques. She is a Catholic convert, and found the courage in her faith to say 'No' to practices that she knew were wrong – morally wrong, as well as practically ineffective. She realised that it was essential to have a conscience that was formed in line with the Church's vision of human reality and worth. You cannot just hope that you will pick up God's vision for the world automatically, or by osmosis. You have to ask difficult questions and look for wise answers in the Church's treasure house of wisdom. *"What I realized in Guantanamo is, first of all, that formation really needs to happen before the difficult challenges come. And because we can't predict when those come, the time for conscience formation is right now."* When we are faced with a difficult decision, one that puts our comfort at risk, or even our life, we need to have the tools to deal with it. These do not come to us by magic, automatically – we need to work at acquiring them from the Church's great wisdom, and its beautiful vision of human flourishing.

And there is more: *"I do think that understanding that there is a cosmic level of justice and that each of us, as human beings, will meet our Maker does provide a broader perspective,"* she says. Our urge to protect our own comfort, to keep it safe, to make sure we live our lives undisturbed, is put into perspective by the prospect of judgement, of the moment when Jesus, with great love and tenderness but with firmness too, will ask us 'this day you saw the right thing to say, but stayed silent, keeping your comfort and wellbeing intact but at great cost to others - what was going on there?'

'Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; fear him rather who can destroy both body and soul on hell'. These words of advice given to the twelve are for us, too. Do not treasure comfort at any cost; learn now from an ancient wisdom what are the tools that will help you 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6.8) – do not just hope it will pass you by, or challenge someone else; the time to form your conscience is now. And do not forget, this freedom to act or not, to speak or to stay silent, in every situation will require the giving of an account in due course.

¹ https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254589/former-guantanamo-bay-interrogator-speaks-about-torture-conscience-and-faith?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

I found a reference to this article in the always excellent blog www.coramfratribus.com