

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 10th September 2023

The psalm for our Mass today is used each morning by clergy and religious at the start of their daily prayers. It sets a tone of joy and thanksgiving, but it also contains a heartfelt plea: 'O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts!' Every day, then, the voice of God makes the same appeal to us: Harden not your hearts. We are begged, each day, to live with hearts that are soft.

Soft hearts are gentle: they are open, understanding and generous. They see, first of all, what is good and true; they are ready to be surprised, to embrace the unexpected, But they are, inevitably, vulnerable and easily bruised. The image of The Sacred Heart that is so much a part of Catholic devotion shows us the softest of hearts, a heart that is generous and merciful but which is so easily damaged, that in a world of selfishness and greed will inevitably remain damaged and wounded until the end of time.

We sometimes have an image of the Old Testament prophets as wild and harsh men, constantly speaking out and making themselves unpopular as they try to enforce some sort of religious uniformity. Last week's image of Jeremiah in the stocks, laughed at and ridiculed, together with this week's image of Ezekiel the watchman might make us think again. For each of them, being a prophet is far from comfortable, and far from what they would choose. This passage from Ezekiel follows a reminder to the prophet of the role of the city watchman: he is to patrol the walls, looking out for danger, and if he sees it he must not hesitate, he must sound the ram's horn that warns the people and summons the guard. The prophet's task is not to force people into fulfilling some alien command, it is to warn them of impending danger. Far from being a harsh proclaimer of rules and regulations, the prophet is a watchman looking out for danger; he is a doctor on the lookout for the early signs of disease. He will need to have a soft heart that will allow him to feel the effects of the danger that is coming, to be one with its potential victims. His diagnosis will probably not be popular, and the recipients may not want to hear it, but it is made out of softness of heart, not hardness. It is proclaimed out of love: 'Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour' St Paul says to the Romans.

But, just as the prophet's message will not always be received with enthusiasm, to live with a soft heart will remain a constant challenge. Exposed to the cold air of cynicism, or indifference, or self-promotion, the softest heart will tend to harden in self defence. To live with a soft heart is a daily challenge: it requires us deliberately to choose not to let it be hardened by every slight, every rejection, every failure. A heart that is hard, or cold, or both, will be fairly safe, but also fairly sterile. It will make us more inclined to defend ourselves, to stay within the safe confines of what is familiar, to refuse dialogue with those who are strange, or challenging, or uncomfortable and to stick with what we know and like. This temptation is so strong that we need a daily reminder of how the hearts of the Israelites in the wilderness became hardened, a daily summons: 'O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts!'

There is a topical reminder of this being played out this morning on a village football field in rural Poland (coincidentally, not so far from the border with Ukraine). Several thousand people will be gathering there for a unique event today, as for the first time an entire family is to be beatified. The Ulma family – father, mother, and seven children, were all murdered by the Nazis in 1944. Their so-called crime had been to shelter eight people of Jewish birth, who were being hunted for extermination. In those circumstances there were plenty of people (including the person who betrayed them) had hearts of stone, but the Ulma family kept their hearts soft. Their faith left them no choice. They knew about the hard-hearted men who lurked outside, like wolves hunting for sheep to destroy, but the softness of their hearts meant they felt they had no choice. For them there was only one thing that they could do, whatever the cost.

Good Heavens, there are enough hard-hearted people in the world: too much anger, hatred, ridicule; too many ears closed against anyone who disagrees, too many eyes closed to uncomfortable consequences, too many minds closed to anything new. There are too many people who have let their hearts grow hard. We cannot always blame them: sometimes it is sin and selfishness that causes the hardness of heart, but other times it is fear, or weakness. Who knows how we, ourselves, would act if put to the test? We cannot know. But one thing we can know, if our hearts are to be soft, yielding, generous and warm at the time of trial, we need to cultivate a daily discipline of responding to the cry of the psalm. As we read or hear the news, as we come across the words and actions of other people, one way to measure up what we see and hear is this: does this show a heart that is hard, or a heart that is soft?