

The 22nd Sunday of Year A: Facing our future – for good or ill.

1st Reading: Jeremiah 20:7-9: The prophet bemoans his fate;

2nd Reading: Romans 12:1-2: Good behaviour is our ‘offering’ to God;

Gospel: Matthew 16:21-27: Jesus predicts his passion - and its lesson for us.

This weekend, all 3 readings have two similar themes: first, how ‘God’s ways’ are not the same as ‘normal human’ ways; second, the effect this difference has on how we act. When it comes to public rules of behaviour, modern countries tend to have a sort of ‘utilitarian’ view: what is ‘right’ is what makes the majority of people more happy; what is ‘wrong’ is what makes the majority less happy. Generally speaking, this is the basis on which our Parliament passes legislation. For the most part, this works out well - even for Christian morality – in areas such as public laws, universal education, health-care, access to housing, voting rights, and so on. However, there are times when this is not the case: we can think of some countries’ discrimination against ethnic, language or religious minorities; the UK’s denial of the right to life to many unborn children; some places’ ill-treatment of prisoners, etc. The majority are unaffected by such policies, but they are still seen as ‘wrong’, so there must be some other way of deciding ‘right’ from ‘wrong’ (not just what makes the majority happy); for us, it involves God’s will.

I don’t want a homily to read like an ‘A’ Level Ethics essay, but sometimes major issues are raised by the Church’s choice of readings. This Sunday, it is definitely serious: the difference our faith makes to the way we should behave. Let us start with the first reading: the problems faced by the prophet Jeremiah. He worked from about 605 BC down to about 585 BC, the period when the Jews were about to be deported to Babylon (The exile started in 587 BC.) His writings show his warning that Judah’s moral mess would have one outcome: invasion, leading to exile. People rejected his message, thinking him either mad or unpatriotic: *“I am a daily laughing-stock, everybody’s butt. Each time I speak, I have to proclaim ‘Violence and ruin!’ This has meant for me insult & derision.”* ‘Common sense’ told him to keep quiet, but something made him carry on: *“A fire was burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; the effort to restrain it wearied me. I could not bear it.”* The cost of doing God’s will was awful, and emotionally he was tempted to give the majority in Jerusalem what they wanted – public silence about their immorality - but his conscience made him continue.

The gospel is one to which I referred recently: Jesus’ first prediction of his passion and death. Following-on from last week’s story about Peter’s profession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, then Jesus’ calling Simon the “Rock” on which the future Church’s faith would be based, there is an awful sense of deflation this weekend. Jesus said that his sort of Messiah-ship was to be very different from that which people expected – and wanted. Matthew continues: *“(He told them) he was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the*

elders, chief priests & scribes, to be put to death and to be raised on the third day.” This must have been a ghastly shock, after the apparent success of his work in Galilee, then his promotion of Simon Peter. While the idea of eventual resurrection was comforting, the rest of Jesus’ scenario was a nightmare: total rejection by the two main strands of Jewish public life – the Temple worship led by the chief priests, and the Law of Moses, as interpreted by scribes in the Pharisee party. For those reading this 2,000 years later, it is almost impossible to understand the horror Jesus’ prediction would have caused to his followers.

Jesus did not merely warn his disciples about his own future; he said that this idea of going against popular opinion would involve his followers also. *“If anyone wants to be a followers of mine, he must take up his cross and follow me. Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.”* There could not be a more stark statement that following Jesus would mean making choices that go against the norms of the society in which we live. For centuries, when most European countries had a public Christian ethos, the problem did not often arise, but in recent decades our societies have become totally secular (non-religious), so there are difficult decisions to be made. True, in western countries there is little likelihood of being put to death for religion (Jesus’ idea of ‘taking up the cross’, as criminals in the Roman world had to do, on their way through the streets to execution) – but there is much chance of ridicule, and rejection by one’s friends and peer group; younger people find this very hard.

To counter this, there are many in religious life who want to ‘water down’ the Christian moral law to make it “relevant to modern life” – in other words, the same as non-religious society. I can understand this: it is an attractive idea – to a point. But the problem is this: when you have made Christian behaviour the same as non-religious people’s behaviour, the question arises - what is the point of having faith at all? St Paul is very strong on this in the 2nd reading: *“Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new (ie, faith-based) mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God, and know what is good.”*

I usually try (not always successfully!) to relate faith to real life, but we sometimes face a blunt choice: to decide between what we know to be God’s will (revealed by the Bible & the Church) and what popular opinion recommends us to do. This applies clearly in sexual and right-to-life areas, but also in contexts such as the use of money, work practices and respect for the “truth”. All of us face temptation in different aspects of these things, and that is where Paul’s words help. For him, making the right choice is one of the ways we worship God: *“In a way worthy of thinking beings, offer your living bodies as a holy sacrifice...to God.”* When we need to choose a harder path – like Jeremiah – that is when we “carry a cross”, sharing Jesus’ offering of himself to the Father. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

