21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

21st August 2011

Some of us have lived long enough to have witnessed a subtle but significant change in the way we live our lives.

A change from living in neighbourhoods in which back doors were left open through which friends and neighbours came and went at will. Neighbourhoods in which churches were open from dawn ‘til dusk; allowing us to pop in for a quiet prayer or to light a candle.

Contrast those days with now when we have locks on our windows and double locks on our doors. We drive past developments with locked gates behind which new ghettos of the rich cut themselves off from the rest of us.

Today most churches (including our own) remain closed except for scheduled services and events; whilst shops bring down shutters at the end of each trading day.

Meanwhile it sometimes feels like our every move is being monitored on street cameras.

Technically we have never lived more security conscious lives; the irony is that few of us feel as safe today as we did not so many years ago.

It is not my intention to propose that we do away with such devices. There is a lot of sense in keeping the chain on the door when first opening to unexpected callers. Yet it is worth considering whether one consequence of these changes has been a loss of confidence and trust in every stranger. Not only the hoodie on the street corner but each caller at our door, not to mention those who have come to our neighbourhoods seeking better lives for their families.

The Church in the West has also entered into a period of hiding behind closed doors. Talking among ourselves whilst engaging less in open dialogue with those of other faiths or none. A Church that concentrates on the minutiae of its liturgical and catechetical practices while neglecting to acknowledge how it has failed some of its most vulnerable members.

So perhaps when Jesus handed those figurative keys to Peter and his companions he harboured a secret hope that we would do a little more loosening than binding.

Discussing his own contribution as a thinker and writer the French philosopher Michel Foucault said “I’m not a prophet, but my job is making windows where there were once walls”.

The Christian community is at its most vibrant best when we have the confidence of our convictions to the point that we can readily acknowledge our failings and doubts.

The words of Pope John XXIII when summoning the Second Vatican Council are often quoted in this regard. He said let us open the windows so that the Holy Spirit can come in.

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