Advent 3B 2011 (read only)

The controversial American poet Allen Ginsberg once gave a lecture on the theme of prophecy. After the lecture a young student asked: “Mr Ginsberg, how does one become a prophet?” to which he replied, “Tell your secrets”.

Ginsberg felt that contemporary society needed a real debate about its values. The methods he chose to initiate this debate were evidently and deliberately controversial. So he cannot have been surprised when his writings provoked a reaction from the self-styled guardians of public propriety. He no doubt suspected that a good number them were hypocritical; preaching one form of morality while disregarding it in the conduct of their personal lives.

So Ginsberg’s answer to the young questioner could be taken as an invitation to us all to engage in an open and frank discussion about values; and to do so in a way that remains in touch with the real events, emotions and dilemmas of life. And to ask questions that challenge rigid moralisms to take account of human nature and individual experience... In other words, to think outside the box.

Those who came to interrogate John the Baptist were incapable of thinking outside the box. They had a set of fixed questions given to them by higher authorities. They were not free to ask what was on their own hearts.

Their job was to pin John down, and get him to accept a predetermined label: Christ, Elijah, The Prophet.

John refused to comply. He asserted his freedom to be simply a voice crying in the wilderness.

Pressed to explain himself further John compounds the frustration of his questioners by declaring that they are incapable of recognising the one they should be looking for. One who stands among them – unknown.

They will remain incapable of recognising this hidden presence for as long as they only ask questions that come from others.

Whereas those who embark on the quest of true seekers begin with the questions that lie heavily in their own hearts; what Allen Ginsberg calls “our secrets”.

The same is surely true for us all.

Think of the scene on the road to Emmaus, two despondent disciples leaving Jerusalem after the trauma of Jesus’ crucifixion. They are sharing their troubles and disappointments; being honest with each other.

As they talk a stranger comes alongside them, engages in their conversation, responds to their heartfelt sadness and in doing so reawakens their hope. They recognise who the stranger is when they sit together at supper and break bread.

Our own gatherings for the Eucharist are a weekly opportunity to bring the questions weighing on our own hearts. Listening to the scriptures we open ourselves to renewed insights and hope. Then in the breaking and sharing of the bread and wine of the Eucharist we discover that we are never alone when we tell our secrets.

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