6th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B 2012 (read only)

The original remit for public service broadcasters required that they inform as well as entertain. In recent times this remit has been extended by programmes that try to change things. Jamie Oliver has run campaigns to improve the nutritional content of school meals, he also ran schools to train up unemployed youngsters as chefs. Hugh Fernley Whittingstall has encouraged the use of organic, locally sourced and sustainable food. He has also run a campaign to encourage people to cultivate food on un-used plots of land and gardens. In the broad realm of public health issues and of a more sensitive and controversial area people like Davina McCall have presented programmes concerning sexual health and behaviour for teenagers.

This week saw the start of yet another campaigning programme presented by Gok Wan – this one is targeting a whole range of issues that cause young people to feel bad about themselves; including the size, shape and weight of their bodies, different or confused sexuality and bullying. It’s not for me to judge quite how appropriate every detail of such programmes are but I do want to applaud them for addressing important subjects and real human dilemmas.

Indeed this latest effort by Gok Wan deserves special mention because it is trying to tackle serious issues faced by some of the youngest and most vulnerable. For despite the teenage bravado these youngsters have hearts that can hurt or break. The years surrounding puberty have always been always hard to negotiate but today’s teenagers have to cope with an additional barrage of media images of perfection and peer-group pressure. Those who are perceived as different from the crowd are too readily pushed out of social networks, gangs and groups and can be targeted and assaulted verbally, physically and now with cyber-bullying thrown in. Sad to say such youngsters don’t always feel supported or understood by the Church either.

It seems that every generation throws up a new group of outcasts; in Jesus’ day such public opprobrium was targeted at a mixture of imperial collaborators and public sinners; but it was those suffering from a variety of skin conditions all lumped under the dread title of leprosy, who bore the brunt of ostracism. They were cast out of the community both figuratively and physically. Their social isolation was real and was compounded by excommunication from the company of believers.

All of which only goes to show how radical was Jesus’ response to the leper in today’s Gospel encounter. Rather than keeping a respectful distance, the leper has the courage to come right up to Jesus. He even has the audacity to speak to this man with a growing reputation for healing saying: ‘If you want to you can cure me.’ This is both an act of faith and a challenge. Jesus rises to the challenge and responds to the man’s faith. First he reassures him that despite rejection by everyone else he really does want to help him ‘of course I want to’ he replies ‘be cured’. And what’s more, he reaches out and touches him physically to emphasise and deepen the message. Nor does he leave it there. He urges the man to seek reinstatement in the wider community and claim his renewed status publicly by approaching the priests and the Temple.

If this is how he responded to those forced out of society in his own day what would Jesus make of the vast array of those who are pushed to the edge in today’s world? How would he respond to the prejudice and fear that stalks our world and leaves its many victims without the comfort of welcome, understanding and care. Furthermore, what challenge would he pose to today’s religious leaders who stand in judgement when they try to claim a place in God’s kingdom?

© pcm 2012