Homily 3 Sunday of Advent Year C 2012 (read only)

There is a famous quote attributed to the Irish poet and painter William Butler Yeats which I wouldn’t dare to repeat if it hadn’t been written by an Irishman:

No one seems to know who Yeats was writing about, but he said:

*Being Irish, he had an abiding sense of tragedy, which sustained him through temporary periods of joy.*

Even if it is true, what Yeats attributes to the Irish is not confined to the inhabitants of that beautiful country. Indeed the human race has good reason to keep in mind the many instances of tragedy that litter human history and bring shame to our race. The sufferings inflicted on entire populations in recent centuries must never be forgotten or swept under the carpet, to do so is to add further disrespect the victims and risk repeating the crimes of their persecutors.

But it is also important to listen to the songs and stories told and sung by people who have suffered. They often carry a message of hope and resilience. Traditional Irish music does not shirk from its anger at the suffering of oppression and famine but in telling stories of the bonds of loyalty and love that transcend suffering; those same songs bear witness to the hope that can sustain us even in our deepest agonies.

Likewise the spirituals first sung on the slave plantations of America and the Caribbean combine stark awareness of struggle and injustice with abiding trust in the liberating power of God.

And at the very heart of Jewish identity lies the story of the Exodus a story that Miriam transposed into song and which is commemorated year upon year at the Jewish feast of Passover.

The joy experienced by the Hebrews when they found freedom from slavery in Egypt has sustained them through centuries of persecution, ridicule and anti-semitism. Indeed joy is often heard to echo most strongly in the scriptures during periods of exile when the people yearn for a return to the Holy Land and when under occupation, they picture the coming of the Messiah.

The case was rather different for Zephaniah who in our first reading proclaims: *Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, Israel, shout aloud! Rejoice, exult with all your heart, Daughter of Israel!* For in his day the people of Israel were under the rule of their own kings, they had what today would be called self-determination.

But their kings, like most rulers, were of mixed ability, often had dubious moral standing, and many presided over a decline in the sincere practice of faith.

Zephaniah spoke to a situation not unlike our own; but he did not allow his hope to give way do cynicism or despair. We too are invited on this day to allow our inner joy to bubble to the surface and to sing with confident expectation of the coming of Christ.

I like to think that Yeats was being both honest and a bit tongue in cheek when he ascribed to the Irish an abiding sense of tragedy that was only temporarily disturbed by joy.

Joy is not the opposite of suffering, neither is it a complete antidote to our human failings and tragedies.

But it is a gift first received at our baptism and confirmed by our own experience and conviction that life is not ultimately under the grip of tragedy because hope is stronger, because love abides in darkness and because life aspires to that eternal bliss which God invites us to share.

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