Homily for 33rd Sunday Year C 2016

There can be little doubt that people will look back on the year 2016 as one in which tables seem to have been turned and established institutions called into question. The US election has produced an outcome as unexpected as the EU referendum. The voting populations of both countries have been split down the middle. In both instances the anxieties perceived and experienced by one half of society have seemingly been transferred onto the other. Anxiety about the future direction of their country in one section of society has become anxiety felt by those whose vote did not prevail. The optimism of some is matched with equal force by the pessimism of others.

The context might seem to be very different and the language of today’s scriptures draws very strongly from the apocalyptic tradition. But the language of this year’s big political contests has had its own apocalyptic tone; and the politics of fear has been employed on all sides of these debates. Voters who have been sincerely trying to weigh up the merits of each case have been perplexed and disturbed by the vitriolic tone of some of the more strident campaigners. In some instances, this has spilled out onto the streets in demonstrations, riots and acts of violence and discrimination against migrant workers and their families; all of which is to be abhorred and resisted by all who are on the side of the common good.

Those who are genuinely concerned with truth, justice and harmony in society have a vital role to play if they are to bring the healing rays anticipated in our first reading. Such a task requires integrity, commitment, creative judgement and endurance in the face of those who would sow mistrust, division and violence. The heralds of peace speak with the divine eloquence and wisdom promised by Jesus in the gospel.

The incapacity of the powerful European empires of previous centuries to act with wisdom and justice produced unprecedented bloodshed in the C20th. Today the inhabitants of the middle East suffer similar consequences, while we struggle to express our humanitarian concern for its victims as they seek refuge in our midst.

Where, we might ask, is God in all of this. Can God not take command, knock human heads together and force us to forge peace?

The Anglican priest and author Michael Mayne addressed a similar issue in a book written during his treatment for terminal cancer. The conclusion he reached was that for better or worse, God has entrusted the earth to us, “he seems to be a Creator who in an act of divine self-limitation, relinquishes control over creation, allowing it and its creatures to be self-creative as we seek for beauty, goodness and truth, and struggle to realize our full potential and assume responsibility for the stewardship of nature, the power of reconciliation and the language of love.”

The near fifty-fifty splits among the voters of America and the UK are testimony to Shakespeare’s genius for tragi-comedy; human hearts being made in the image of the creator, have an enormous capacity for goodness, but not being God, we continue to allow evil to co-exist. The only path to the healing of the world lies in human compassion consistently overcoming hatred; to coin a phrase: “Love trumps hate!”

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