Lent 1A 2017

We live in turbulent times in the sense that the peace of our society has been disturbed by being required to take one side or another in a referendum. My guess is that if people were honest with themselves they would see advantages and disadvantages on both sides of the argument. But a referendum is a blunt instrument that forces people to come down on one side or the other or not to bother at all. This creates winners and losers and unleashes tensions and demons that lurk beneath the surface of any society. Those on the winning side feel jubilant, invincible even; emboldened to say and do things they previously hesitated to reveal. The losers are inclined to wallow in their disappointment, disengage and absolve themselves from trying to contribute to the restoration of some equilibrium and harmony. In this way both sides collude in a winner-takes-all attitude to life. Both have fallen for their respective temptations. Many of us perhaps find ourselves grappling with these same temptations.

There are echoes here of an earlier period in English history.

The English Civil War required the population to takes sides and choose between two equally flawed absolutist positions; either the King or Parliament (parliament being in those days a gathering of landowners). Meanwhile, the common folk were mere pawns and canon-fodder.

At the same time as the Civil War people were also forced to take sides in religious disputes. The most obvious was Catholic or Protestant. But there were further divisions; sincere Protestants who could not conform to the idea of a state church dissented. Like Catholics they faced discrimination and persecution.

One such dissenting Christian was the Baptist John Bunyan. He came from a humble background but rose to prominence following imprisonment on grounds of conscience and the publication of his best seller *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

John Bunyan had personally endured many hardships on account of his convictions but his faith enabled him to persevere rather than conform for the sake of an easy life. He had come face to face in prison with his own inner torments and yet found the inner strength to remain true to his path.

*The Pilgrim’s Progress* is his literary and allegorical testament to his own life of faith; and how we have to negotiate a path in life that requires real choices, real moral dilemmas, real discernment of truth and justice. It would be so easy if the answers to all these things were completely evident, obvious and easy.

But those other allegorical figures, Adam and Eve, remind us that we cannot claim for ourselves complete control over such matters and when we do it leads to suffering. Jesus on the other hand faces down the easy answers of the Tempter. He remains true to his relationship with God; he looks to the scriptures for guidance and refuses to put God’s sovereignty to the test.

Today’s readings give us an opportunity to reflect on the aspects of our own lives that challenge our own integrity. Matters of conscience in the face of which we can easily feel disheartened. Ours, then might be the words first penned by John Bunyan.

He who would valiant be ’gainst all disaster,

Let him in constancy follow the Master.

There’s no discouragement shall make him once relent

His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Who so beset him round with dismal stories

Do but themselves confound—his strength the more is.

No foes shall stay his might; though he with giants fight,

He will make good his right to be a pilgrim.

Since, Lord, Thou dost defend us with Thy Spirit,

We know we at the end, shall life inherit.

Then fancies flee away! I’ll fear not what men say,

I’ll labour night and day to be a pilgrim.

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