Homily for the 14the Sunday in Ordinary Time 2017

It was my Dad who first told me of a notorious event that took place in Manchester almost exactly 200 years ago. It began with a peaceful public gathering at St Peter’s Fields in what is now the heart of the city. On 16 August 1819, a crowd of more than 50,000 met to hear a radical orator Henry Hunt speak in favour of reforming Britain's notoriously corrupt political system.

Without any provocation the City Magistrates ordered the Yeomanry to disperse the crowd. And as the cavalry charged with sabres drawn, at least 15 people, including a woman and child, were killed.

This event now known as the Peterloo Massacre was eulogised in a 91 verse poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley called *The Masque of Anarchy* (masque not as in a face covering but as a public event or performance often associated with the overblown sense of self-importance of people in power).

*And if then the tyrants dare*

*Let them ride among you there,*

*Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew, -*

*What they like, that let them do.'*

*'With folded arms and steady eyes,*

*And little fear, and less surprise,*

*Look upon them as they slay*

*Till their rage has died away.'*

*'Then they will return with shame*

*To the place from which they came,*

*And the blood thus shed will speak*

*In hot blushes on their cheek.'*

Two hundred years on we may like to think that the lessons have been learnt; yet our own times have witnessed equally brutal reactions to the legitimate aspirations of ordinary citizens.

To take just three examples: the Hungarian uprising 1956, protests in Tiananmen Square 1989 and more recently barrel bombing by the Syrian Regime of its own people.

These events came to mind as I read our first reading in which Zechariah makes reference to chariots and horses in the streets (the tanks and armoured vehicles of the day).

The prophet contrasts with these images of violent control, intimidation and arrogance; with the humble demeanour of one who will enter the city riding on the lowliest of animals, to banish weapons and proclaim a universal peace.

Christians recognise this figure in the person of Jesus; a Messiah who contradicts all expectations and who overturns our notions of where power and authority lie and how they are manifest in God’s kingdom.

Then as now; too many think that strength resides in power and the ability to control others. Or that wealth and the ability to own and accumulate possessions are the first aim in life. Others seek advantage over others through education and prestigious positions.

Jesus, on the other hand praises God for: “hiding the mysteries of the kingdom from the learned and the clever and revealing them to children.”

The trouble is that we grow up; we see that life is not always fair; we suffer personal setbacks and witness terrible events. These present a constant challenge to our faith in the promise of God’s kingdom.

We retain our citizenship of God’s kingdom but are less inclined to take it too seriously or we submit to cynicism which leaves us demoralised.

Perhaps we suffer so many miseries by looking for answers in the wrong places. When we look to the rich, the powerful, and the opinion formers as if they can come up with all the answers, we abdicate our own dignity and responsibility.

Perhaps the real answers lie among the little people, the sick and dying, the poor and hungry. Through our contact with them we discover a different kind of peace and the satisfaction that comes from humbly reaching out to others.

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