

Sunday Homily

12TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

30 AUGUST 2020

YEAR A

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.”

Matthew 16:23

Introduction

It seems to be an acknowledged truth among workers with terminally ill patients that people who are dying sometimes need “permission” from their loved ones to die. (Not by any other than natural causes, of course.) When it is clear that they are prepared, some need to know, through word or gesture, that their leaving is acceptable.

Elsie knew that she was dying and was ready to do so. We all knew that, and by every means at her disposal, apart from the actual words, Elsie was trying to ask for permission to be allowed to pass away. Except that her husband, who adored her, refused to accept that she was dying, and his inability to face the reality of what was happening prevented Elsie from a dignified and graceful death. Her physical symptoms and the sadness of her circumstances were almost overwhelming, even for the professionals. Her husband insisted upon nursing her at home. He permitted no reference to the probability of her dying and clung to her little bit of life as though it was his own.

Eventually, of course, Elsie did die. But her passing became a silent struggle with her husband, an ending which might have been avoided if he had been able to face an incontrovertible reality with fortitude. No blame attaches to him. He loved Elsie and could not bear to be parted from her. But perhaps this helps us to understand Peter’s response to Jesus when the bad news became too much for him to bear.

Gospel Teaching

By this stage of Jesus’ ministry it was clear to Peter and the other disciples that he was their Messiah, but they had yet to understand that he would not be the conquering king driving all before him and expelling Israel’s enemies from the land given them by God. When Jesus rounds on him so violently we hear echoes of his very human frustration: that Peter is still thinking in the old terms and not in the radical new way of Jesus and his rule of love, not power and vengeance.

But Peter’s response is our response. We do not want Jesus to suffer either, we do not want him to die. “God forbid it, Lord!” Peter says. But Jesus knows that God

will not forbid it; God will not cause his death, but will not prevent it, because the free will given to humanity means that God, too, must watch a beloved child put to death. Jesus is as scared as any of us would be. (The serene acceptance of all that is to come is some people's interpretation of Jesus' response to his fate, but this belies his full humanity.) Not only does Jesus have to deal with his own feelings, but he has these underscored by Peter's inability to understand and accept the full reality of what is to come.

Jesus did not really think Peter was Satan but simply that this title represents everything which opposes truth and is allied to worldliness, not God's kingdom. At the same time, Jesus does not want the natural anxiety and sorrow of the situation transforming into pessimism, the canker of the soul. The sister of reality is hope in Jesus' message today.

Application

There is a clear choice for us here. All disciples must be prepared for the worst as well as the best: this is the reality of our vocation. We take up our responsibilities and then accept the consequences – this is mature spirituality, this is dedicated commitment. The good thing about facing reality is that it unlocks us from the prison of impotent, unending fear of unknowing, and frees us to make change, to move forward and live more fully.

Yes, it is scary at first: all freedom is frightening, because everything becomes possible when one has nothing to lose. Jesus knew this. He was prepared to risk everything and did not need Peter's fussing, however well meant, or needy. He wanted Peter to grow up and face the truth and then accept what must come, so that he and Jesus could be free to pursue the next phase of their shared ministry. Jesus knew that it was a crucial step on the way to the disciples learning from where they would eventually find the strength to found and maintain the future Church: from his example, but also from within themselves. Facing reality, with hope, rarely disappoints when we undertake it with Christ.