

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson

Sunday 22nd August 2021 - 21st Sunday in ordinary time

Readings (Year B): 1st: Joshua 24:1-2. 15-18. Psalm: 33. 2nd: Ephesians 5:21-32. Gospel: John 6:60-69.

As the events of the last few weeks unfolded, none of us can be unmoved by them, all of which raise many questions in our minds. I'm thinking particularly of Plymouth, Haiti and Afghanistan.

I have included Bishop Mark's homily at a vigil in our cathedral in the newsletter (+ see end of these notes). I believe he came back from his holiday to be with the people. Some of what he says reflects our own questioning and wonder at what is going on.

Natural disaster, earthquake, you no doubt saw a ruined church that was full at the time of many families for a baptism, and the mother who survived, but her baby died in the quake.

All that and on Tuesday this week, at the Office of Readings, the 2nd reading was from a sermon of St Augustine, that begins *'Whenever we suffer some distress or tribulation, there we find warning and correction for ourselves. Our holy scriptures themselves do not promise us peace, security and repose, but tribulations and distress; and the gospel is not silent about scandals; but 'he who perseveres to the end will be saved.'* From Adam of Old to the Adam of today, toil and sweat, thorns and thistles. Have we forgotten the flood? Have we forgotten those burdensome times of famine and wars? They were written about to prevent us complaining of the present time against God'

I have quoted that in next week's newsletter; worth reading and reflecting.

It is as if a cloud hovers between us and God, as we seek to understand some of what is going on. From time to time that cloud of unknowing is pierced by a shaft of light which tells us something about God.

It may be a moment of total happiness, an experience of true love. Conversely it may be in sorrow and sadness that we experience his presence. In ecstasies and agonies his voice is unmistakable to those prepared to listen and look.

Doubt is the instrument to purify our faith. ‘Lord I do believe, help my unbelief. Time and again it is against all the odds, against everything my brain is telling me.

But faith must be purified time and again because it is the purification of faith that leads to growth in love, and God is love.

Today’s readings come at a crunch time for Joshua and for Jesus. Joshua succeeded Moses as leader, and he and the people of Israel are at a turning point in their relationship with God. Their long exodus journey has been completed, they’ve arrived in the Promised Land.

Joshua challenges them to choose whom to serve God or the local gods. They say ‘we will serve the Lord, for he is our God.’ Jesus, at the end of this bread of life discourse we’ve followed, is also at a turning point. Will his disciples join the ranks of the sceptics, who can’t fathom Jesus and his talk of ‘eating his flesh’ or will they commit themselves to Jesus – and the shadows of the cross that are beginning to fall?

Sometimes when we are uncertain, hesitant, and when in a very godless world we are tempted to doubt, then remember the words of Jesus ‘what about you, do you want to go away too?’

Is there a note of anxiety in his voice, just in case we might? But I have the impression that if they had chosen to leave, Jesus would simply have started anew. He was not going to change his teaching to attract in the crowds. Instead he would teach what he knew to be true, for his words are Spirit and they are life.

Simon Peter answers as ever, ‘Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’

Let that be our act of faith when reason is of no avail, and when there is only darkness around with no one to guide and help except the Lord.

Lord I believe: a prayer to which he listens readily, and rejoices when it is said.

Canon Philip Dyson

Bishop Mark's Homily at a Vigil in the Cathedral on Tuesday.

Certainly, the deaths of Maxine, Lee, little Sophie, Stephen and Kate have had a profound impact on us all. We do not understand the madness, the darkness that overtook their shooter five evenings ago in this hour. It is still with a sense of dismay, of deep sadness, that we gather this evening. We do so to be in silence and in solidarity, to pray for the dead, for the injured, for the loved ones of those who lost their lives, and for all those who have been deeply affected by this tragic event. We include the family of the shooter in our prayers. They, too, are victims.

As regards the shooter, our hearts are deeply disturbed. We know something of his struggle - that he felt "defeated by life" - but this does not answer the cry of our hearts regarding these innocents who have died or been injured, by his hand. So, him we can only offer to the judgment and purification of God.

The Psalmist sings that 'The Lord will guard us from evil' and we do not understand why that did not happen in our city on Thursday evening. In the face of the mystery of evil, of darkness, we can but stand in silence and lament. Our prayer for the innocent is an echo of the cry of Jesus on the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"?

The Son of God Himself knew from the inside the experience of darkness, of innocent suffering. In his own death on the Cross, Jesus confronted the mystery of evil and has overcome it. Darkness does not have the last word. In experiencing Jesus in our own lives, we seek to give comfort to one another, to our city and especially to the injured and the bereaved. Because the Son of God overcame darkness through His death, His days in the tomb and in His Resurrection, in silence and in solidarity, we pray that something of His life and light may fall upon us.

So may our city rise from this hour of darkness. So may Maxine, Lee, little Sophie, Stephen, Kate and all the dead find a place of light and of peace.

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