

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Some years ago, serving in the Naval College at Dartmouth we were due to host a visit by the then Bishop of Leeds, Arthur Roche, who is now a Cardinal in Rome. It was to include a formal dinner in what's called the Senior Gunroom - a vast dining hall on the west wing of the College.

The room came alive at mess dinners. The walls were decorated with battle honours going back to King Alfred the Great and portraits of dead Admirals glaring down at the future of the Navy. Tables glowing in the candlelight held polished glasses and silverware. There were Latin graces and everyone in their best uniform.

Sea shanties were played by our own Royal Marines band in the minstrels' gallery as stewards rushed to and fro with decanters of wine and plates of food. On Trafalgar Night a sailor would dance the hornpipe as chefs carried a baron of beef in procession around the room and, later, the dessert - a flotilla of chocolate ships of the line decorated with sparklers and filled with Maltesers which, of course, were used as cannonballs and fired across the Mess. For the young cadets it was their first introduction to the finest elements of Naval tradition, pageantry and fellowship which foster the ethos of camaraderie and shared sense of purpose essential to the more serious demands of military service.

Outside the Senior Gunroom is a long corridor called the main drag - said to be the longest corridor in Europe. It leads to the Commodore's House at the far side of the College where the Bishop would be staying and where, in 1939, a young Princess Elizabeth first laid eyes on Prince Philip of Greece. It's said that when King Charles was a cadet at the college in the 1970s he rode his motorbike the entire length of the main drag, meeting a rather angry Commodore's wife at the other end. The College is full of history and tradition and part of the Bishop's itinerary was to explore this and to meet staff and cadets both in the College and in their training boats on the River Dart.

It was planned for the Bishop to celebrate Mass for the Catholic members of the College at 5pm. However, the RAF were visiting that day - a football team from RAF Cranwell were playing our own team in the afternoon in a match that wouldn't finish in time for Mass.

One of our altar servers, a young midshipman called Harry, was also the star player in our football team and so I told him that we wouldn't expect him for Mass. After all, we didn't want the Catholic Church to be the cause of the Navy losing to the RAF!

But Harry took me by surprise. He said 'but of course I'm coming to Mass, Father. I've excused myself from the match'. It was extraordinary. For Harry, faith came first. But, then again, such fidelity isn't unusual in the Forces.

I was once serving on board a frigate in the Middle East. We had a general church service on deck each Sunday morning before the heat took hold and then, in the late afternoon, the Catholics and a few very welcome devout Anglicans, would gather for Mass in the Captain's Day Cabin. And, each week, just after the Mass had started, perhaps in the middle of the first reading, the door would fly open and a breathless young chef called David would hurl himself into the room, full of apologies having climbed the ladders all the way from the chef's mess deep in the bowels of the ship.

It didn't matter that he was late each week. I knew he had to run the gauntlet of his mess mates every time he came to Mass. David lived with particularly cynical colleagues and he would be jeered at and mocked for his faith. Both Harry and David stand out in my memory as examples of people putting their faith first, despite the consequences, so echoing in a small way the courage of the martyrs of this island nation who, many centuries before, paid the ultimate price for being faithful to the Mass and to the legacy of Christ.

As Catholics, our instinct can be to keep our heads down when faith is challenged. It's hard when colleagues, family or friends place us in the dock, and expect us to defend everything the Church has ever taught, said or done. We can be inspired in those moments by the witness of others.

Jeremiah knew the temptation to keep his head down. 600 years before Christ was born, the young prophet was called to speak an unwelcome message to Judah, a nation moving towards disaster. They were godless days - the wealthy exploited the poor, corruption was endemic and what faith there was had descended into a kind of cynical observance.

Fidelity to God made Jeremiah an object of ridicule. Eventually, as we heard in that first reading, he reached breaking point. Yet Jeremiah discovered something extraordinary. He said: "There seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me." Powerful words.

Faith is no longer merely something Jeremiah possesses; it has become part of who he is. To silence God's word within him would be to stop the very heartbeat of his soul.

This is the difference between a half-hearted faith, loosely inherited, and a faith lived with conviction as a daily encounter with Christ. The former can be set aside whenever it becomes inconvenient; but when Christ takes possession of our heart, every choice we make is forged in the white heat of truth. And such faith cannot remain hidden, for it is no longer merely something we profess, but the very foundation of our lives.

St Paul takes us further in this second reading:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

One scholar translates this as:

“Don’t let the world squeeze you into its own mould.”

It's a slightly comical thought, but also unsettling. The world exerts pressure each day in a multitude of different ways and it can shape us before we even realise it's happening.

What light does today's gospel shed on these things?

Well, Peter has just proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah. But when Our Lord speaks of suffering and the Cross, Peter immediately objects:

“This must not happen to you”, he says.

Peter wants to protect Jesus. Yet, without realising it, he is asking Him to become a different kind of Messiah - one without the sacrifice, suffering or the Cross which was integral to the Father's plan for our salvation.

But Jesus says 'you're thinking not like God but like a human'.

They are words which challenge every generation tempted to preach a faith removed from sacrifice and suffering. Such a faith may be easier to live with, and it’s certainly easier to sell, but it loses everything in terms of being faithful to the Gospel and to Christ and it will let us down in the most challenging times of our lives.

Jesus said:

“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me.”

The cross is non-negotiable and it takes a different form in every life - and sometimes more than one.

Each day, we live with our crosses in the intimacy of our home life and carry them into the workplace, the classroom and the wider world. As Catholics, we rarely carry banners or make speeches. Most people will never be aware of the inward struggle to remain faithful without becoming self-righteous, to speak truth with kindness. They'll never appreciate the efforts we make to live by the Gospel in a world governed by such different values.

Yet it is precisely through this quiet, daily fidelity that our spiritual journey unfolds.

Taken together, this week's Scriptures invite us to see that journey not simply as a path we choose, but as a lifelong response to the God who calls us home. Jeremiah discovered God's word burning like fire in his bones. St Paul urged us not to be squeezed into the world's mould. And Jesus simply said: "Follow me."

I don't know if King Charles really did ride a motorbike down the main drag at Dartmouth. He did visit while I was there, and he met the team of chaplains, but none of us had the courage to ask him. What I do know is that he lives as befits a modern-day king, in castles, palaces and mansions. He wears a crown which is beyond price.

Most Catholics, I am sure, would echo the words of the great saint Thomas More who said: "I am the King's good servant, but God's first."

Because our deepest allegiance is to a King whose throne was a Cross, whose crown was made of thorns and whose apparent defeat revealed the depth of divine love.

The martyrs bore witness to that allegiance through their sacrifice; ordinary people such as Harry and David reveal it in quieter but no less faithful ways. Their example reminding us that no hidden act of courage we might make, no unseen witness we might give and no cross we might faithfully be carrying is ever a futile gesture.

Each draws us further along the narrow path towards the glory of heaven - a glory so radiant that we will come to see that even the brightest moments of our earthly lives have been only the first rays of the great dawn to come.