

3rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

We get used to things. Very used to things ! Used to that cross being there. To the seats being arranged as they are - they used to all face in the same direction. Then there are those coloured windows.... So striking to those who come here for the first time. When we get used to things they lose their initial impact – the impact they made on us when we saw them for the first time. I wonder whether we haven't got used to Jesus !!

The reason I ask this is because in his own time Jesus of Nazareth was a most unusual person. He shocked people ! A troubling, disconcerting figure. He still is. Just listen as if for the first time to some of the things he said. *“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who treat you badly....”* Is that what we hear ? Is that what we do ? It's what he did even in the agony of crucifixion. *“Father, forgive them – they do not know what they are doing.”* He was very different.

Again, who did he mix with ? Holy people ? Some of the time. But certainly not all of the time. He mixed with people on the edge, outcasts, those whom his own people considered unclean. He broke the social code when everybody expected him to keep it. He even broke the Jewish Sabbath when he was required to heal. So different was his behaviour that he was pilloried by his critics as a glutton and a drunkard. He even went to far as to socialize with tax collectors who weren't among the downtrodden at all but who were themselves exploiters – collecting taxes for the Romans and additional ones for themselves. Many of his own people must have hated Jesus for that – for including the collaborator and the corrupt in his circle. What they couldn't understand is that God is a people's God, a God for all sorts, a God whose love and salvation is offered unconditionally to everybody, provided, of course, that they repent and believe. As far as the pious Jews were concerned, if God was a God for all sorts, then he couldn't be holy. This revolutionary new message about the nature and attitude of God had to be coming from a false prophet. There was only one penalty in Jewish law for being a false prophet and that penalty was death. It's very clear in the Book of Deuteronomy: *But the prophet who presumes to say in my name a thing I have not commanded him to say, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die (Deut. 18:20)* Being a false prophet would translate for the Romans into being a political rebel. And it was for being a rebel that they crucified him. There was a certain inevitability about the

crucifixion of Jesus. It was in his claims and in his character. When all is said and done, it was in his blood.

Even John the Baptist, who introduced him to the world, was astonished by what Jesus had to say. John the Baptist was a forthright figure with a voice that could be heard all over the desert. His was the word of God amplified. Jesus began his own mission on the same note as John – if not the same volume. He said “*Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand.*” But then – and this is important – Jesus embarked on a ministry of his own. Whereas John the Baptist was pretty much all fire and brimstone, (you know - *the axe is laid to the roots of the trees*) - the emphasis from Jesus is on God’s burning love. The attitude he adopted was so different from John’s. You have it in today’s Gospel in the words he quoted from the prophet Isaiah “*The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me – for he has anointed me – to bring the good news to the poor - to proclaim liberty to captives - and to the blind new sight - to set the downtrodden free - to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour...*” What is **so** noticeable about this passage is the gentleness of the tone and the positive nature of the content. If sinners are in his sights, they are not there to be shot at but to be saved. The people he mentions and whom he means to liberate are all captives of one kind or another. They have been axed enough in life already without being axed by him again. Whereas in John’s case, God’s rule of the world would be marked by judgement and punishment and retribution, in the case of Jesus it would be marked by judgement, yes, but even more so by compassion and understanding and love. Anybody reading the early part of the script could **predict** what he’d say to the woman in adultery. It was nothing if not in character. “*Neither do I condemn you, go away and don’t sin any more.*”

I made a reference to the picture of the Pope that is hanging in the Church porch to one of our very regular Mass-goers the other day. They couldn’t describe it. Didn’t remember having seen it. They hadn’t really noticed it. Do we pass by the person of Jesus without really noticing ? Without really noticing the extraordinary nature of his teaching - and the way he behaved. Loving enemies, praying for persecutors, having time for the outcasts in society, being actively concerned about the poor, the sick and the disabled. Let’s not get too used to Jesus. There’s comfort in him of course. But there is also one heck of a challenge. If he doesn’t shock us at times and shake us out of our lethargy, we really don’t know him at all.