

4th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR C

The Greek philosopher Diogenes was regarded by many who knew him as a somewhat eccentric teacher, not least for his belief that virtue consisted in the avoidance of all physical pleasures, that pain and inconvenience were conducive to goodness. When Alexander the Great visited Diogenes in Corinth, the philosopher was living in a large earthenware tub in one of the city suburbs, Few people could accept either his teaching or his way of life. Diogenes was once noticed begging from a statue.. When someone asked him the reason for this pointless conduct, he replied “I am exercising the art of being rejected.”

Diogenes experienced plentiful rejection in his time; whether he ever became accustomed to being rebuffed remains an open question. In today’s Gospel we see how Jesus, after preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, is rejected by his own townspeople. Some of them are awed by his gracious words, while others are more concerned about his pedigree and his address. The neighbours of Jesus are no different to other neighbours. Jesus, for all his mission to humankind, still has to face local suspicion, gossip, behind-the-curtain-omniscience, experts in character demolition, locals who believe that nothing special can emerge from the neighbourhood without their spotting it first. Prophets are accepted provided that they have come from backwoods somewhere else; there is nothing so unpromising as the local backwoods.

Jesus accepts from experience that a prophet is not accepted in his own country. He is not free from local prejudice, he is not above the normal, haphazard way that people look at other people and events. People complain that Jesus performs no local wonders while at the same time letting him know that they disbelieve in him anyway. When Jesus tells his own people that his mission is addressed to all people, they become angry.

Jesus refuses to share their small-mindedness, their meanness of vision. He will be no part of their pettiness. In responding to his neighbours, Jesus makes it clear that he is not going to live down to their expectations.

Like many groups, the neighbours want Jesus to be different in the same way that they are different. They expect Jesus to share the same exclusive outlook as themselves – as R.D.Laing observed, “Sanity is a matter of

having the same diseases as everyone else.” Jesus is different: he does not share their clannish idea of salvation, their mean image of God, their suspicious view of each other.

When your local audience suddenly becomes a mob, you have reason to be nervous. Jesus’ audience is at such a loss for words, that they do what many mobs did before them, they try the final solution of beating your opponent to death. But Jesus makes himself scarce, learning, so early in his public ministry, the art of knowing when to run. He is not looking for an executioner; he is shy of threatening mobs intent on his death. So he escapes to live and preach another day. And in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus, not surprisingly, does not return home again.

The harsh reality of the Nazareth experience seems a world away from Paul’s description of love in today’s second reading: “Love is always patient and kind: it is never jealous: love is never boastful or conceited: it is never rude or selfish: it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins but delights in the truth: it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.”

The quality of love “to endure whatever comes” can be seen in Jesus’ whole ministry. If love is always patient and kind, it has to face impatience and unkindness. If love is always ready to excuse, it has to face those who are prompt to condemn. If love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins, then it has to face those who delight in the weaknesses of others.

Love has a tough programme. We know this from experience. But what else can meet rejection with such endurance and greatness?