

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

Jesus demonstrated no fear in talking about God nor in sharing the personal convictions which came from his unshakable faith in the God he called Father. He expected his disciples to be equally forthright. On the occasion of the first public appearance of his ministry in the synagogue of his native city, Nazareth, he announced quite boldly that he had come to proclaim the kingdom of God and promote its values. Anyone who subsequently met Jesus expected him to speak about God and virtually all of the conversations and arguments involving Jesus which are reported by the evangelists eventually turn to God.

Today, in the extract from the Gospel of Matthew the Church puts before us, Jesus warns his disciples that they may well frequently be called to account for the beliefs he expects them, as his disciples, to proclaim. He understands that they may well be apprehensive and that kingdom values which were at the heart of his teaching risked challenging many people, particularly those who were wealthy or enjoyed great power. Jesus warned them of potential opposition. He might well have been familiar with the figure of the prophet Jeremiah: he too was forthright in his views and withering in his condemnation of behaviour which was immoral and ran against the Commandments. Jeremiah faced great opposition and, even if he complained, moaned and felt sorry for himself, still he placed all his faith in God. And that is precisely what Jesus encouraged his disciples to do. He assured them how much God cared for each of them individually: the very hairs of their head were numbered, they were so much more valuable than the sparrows of which God took such care.

Being a Christian today is no less demanding of courage than it was in the early days of the Church. We may not be openly persecuted nor may our rights to practise our religion be undermined by the secular state. Yet, in polite society today where the values of the soap opera, the stars of the worlds of cinema and high fashion, and the lives of the political elite set the tone, embracing a set of values which challenge those projected in contemporary media requires courage. There are signs that the coronavirus lockdown has forced a lot of people, including Catholics and Christians whose normal patterns of religious practice have been so severely disrupted through the closing of churches, to reassess the values they consider important and – often in the light of a fresh understanding of the gospel – question their own lifestyle. Many may find that, after lockdown is over, standing up for the new priorities they have set themselves requires great courage, necessitates tough choices and may involve distancing themselves from property and lifestyle habits they had hitherto taken for granted. For a lot of people these post-lockdown decisions will have been inspired by the scriptures they have explored either with themselves or their families during the three months of isolation, and they will find themselves in precisely the same situation as those disciples Jesus warned, encouraged and reassured in today's Gospel: they have God to rely on.

Father Patrick