HOMILY FOR SUNDAY ORDINARY 4 YEAR C

31 JANUARY 2016 ST EDMUND’S CAMBRIDGE

Today’s readings and prayers have as one of their strong themes a provocative warning against ‘insider complacency’, thinking of ourselves as better, holier, more perfect in knowledge and understanding than others, than those outside our circle, our particular world, our church.

So the prophet Jeremiah is consecrated before his birth, while still in his mother’s womb, to be a ‘prophet to the nations’, to confront his own land, his own people, ‘the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests and the country people’.

This morning’s gospel follows on closely, it is the second half, from last Sunday’s passage from the beginning of St Luke. Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth on the Sabbath reads from the prophet Isaiah and applies it to himself: ‘He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour’. We heard that his words earned him admiration, but in today’s passage, his own provocative development of these ideas, causes the admiration to evaporate. Indeed the people themselves first seem to hesitate, yes the words seem admirable, but ‘This is Joseph’s son surely?’; then Jesus himself says ‘No prophet is ever accepted in his own country’. He reflects how often this has been true in the history of Israel – God’s grace does not reach his own people, rather it comes upon the outsider: there were many poor widows in Elijah’s day in Israel, but his help in famine came to a foreign woman, in Zarephath, a Sidonian town; there were many lepers in Elisha’s day in Israel, but his help and healing came to a foreigner, Naaman the Syrian.

It is strange how quickly the people turn from admiration to fear, hate and violence. All of a sudden the people in Nazareth are hustling Jesus up a hill to throw him down the cliff face. As quickly, as in our own internet day, global sympathy as a photograph of a dead migrant child goes viral turns to fear, hate and even violence as stories of migrant attacks on Europeans spin around the world. We can be easily and unthinkingly manipulated and with dread consequences.

Jesus seems to be telling us something rather different. The opening prayer of today’s Mass, asked that ‘we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart’. Love everyone in truth of heart, an apparently simple but actually quite complex phrase; an apparently simple command, but actually the work and growth of a lifetime, no doubt fitful at times and very much putting us in need of the Lord’s year of favour and mercy. St Paul’s hymn to love, our second reading spells out not heady and emotional but practical workaday implications in patience, kindness, delight in truth, excusing others, trusting, hoping, enduring. And some humility of mind: all we see after all are puzzling reflections in a mirror; we do not yet see face to face and know even as we are known.

Living as we do in university and in Catholic contexts, there seem to be some strong indications, though maybe also some puzzling reflections in a mirror, for our own life and work. I must at this point share with you a somewhat guilty secret that I do not always relish Vatican documents as much as perhaps I should, nor always find them an easy read. I have however just earlier this month been urged to read a 2014 Vatican document of the Congregation for Catholic Education called ‘Educating Today and Tomorrow: a renewing passion’. And I have in fact been quite struck by how realistic it is about how life is for us in Catholic institutions within secular universities today, about its readiness to pose and share questions as much as to lay down answers, well nigh impossible to follow, its humility, its plea for conversation, for dialogue and for its celebration of diversity. We are not to think of ourselves as better, holier, more perfect in knowledge and understanding than others, than those outside our circle, our particular world, our church. We are rather called to ‘love everyone in truth of heart’.

It would be most inopportune for me to divert at this stage and to prolong into a lecture on a Vatican document. However, I would like just to mine for a few phrases, which seem to sit very well and to develop for own day, our Mass readings of today. Among the hallmarks of Catholic education the document includes ‘respect of ideas, openness to dialogue, the ability to interact and work together in a spirit of freedom and care’. It says ‘educational relationships must be nourished by mutual esteem, trust, respect and friendliness’ and there must be an inclusive ‘sense of belonging’. It is said that teachers must recognise, respect and enhance diversity, which should be seen as an opportunity and a gift. Then there is this, interesting, indeed provocative phrase putting one in mind of the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian: ‘Coming from different confessional allegiances into Catholic educational institutions should not be seen as a barrier, but as a condition for intercultural dialogue’.

To engage in this dialogue in ‘truth of heart’ we, I speak here of Catholics who come to Mass, need to be inspired and nourished on their way of mission, need to stand with Jesus, and pray to him, as he stood in the synagogue at Nazareth, giving a humble yet compelling witness of faith, going out from ourselves. ‘Educating Today and Tomorrow: a renewing passion’ asks us to present a view of the Other (capital O) and others that is open, peaceful and enticing. Three interesting words, perhaps particularly the third: enticing. I do not think we are going to be able to do that other than by living ever more deeply within the heart of God; may our celebration of Mass today help us to live ‘in truth of heart’ deep within the heart of God.