

Homily for the 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time



King George VI steps up to the microphone and the whole of the FA Cup crowd are waiting to hear the new king, and, of course, he can barely get two words out due to his stutter, and people begin to whisper

and then talk loudly. In the king's eyes it is an embarrassing disaster and he knew it was going to be, yet he did it. This is the most used scene as a trailer for 'The King's Speech.' Earlier in the film we see the horror on his face when he realises all his worst fears have come true. He and his family are dragged from their quiet life because the abdication of his brother forces him, out of duty, to become king. He and his wife go on to become famous for their roles during the Second World War.

Jeremiah is trying to express the same sentiments in the first reading. The last thing he wants to do is become a prophet. Partly because he has a comfortable life as it is, and partly because he knows that prophets rarely come to a good end. Jesus himself, 500 years later, shouts at the Chief Priests and the scribes for the way in which they have treated prophets in the past. Why are the prophets so unpopular? Because it is their job to challenge the people to follow the way of God, to turn back to God. For Jeremiah it is not duty so much as God's powerful voice demanding that he obey. The language he uses is passionate, 'You have seduced me God.' As much as he tried to resist, he cannot and he knows, like King George, that insult and derision will be part of his lot. Like the king, his country will face total collapse, and in Jerusalem's case it happens, and as the city is sacked Jeremiah is forced to flee with the refugees, all of whom have ignored his words. In many ways his life is a failure, in earthly eyes.

Why does this first reading introduce our gospel today then? Commonsense in the cases of King George and Jeremiah would suggest that they should both have turned down what they were asked to do. Their own judgement of themselves should have said that too. Anyone interviewing them for job as monarch or prophet would have said. 'You are not fit, you do not have the qualifications.' And yet in their own way they go on to be incredibly successful.

Peter is using his commonsense when he tackles Jesus. ‘So you say you are going to die? Well, this can easily be avoided.’ And so it could. Jesus’ own family, with Mary no less, had turned up to advise him to tone down his preaching. Why annoy the authorities unnecessarily? Yet this is just the worldly approach Jesus challenges.

This starts to give us some idea of what he means when he says, ‘Renounce your own life; lose your life for my sake.’ Most tellingly, ‘Why gain the whole world and ruin your life?’

There is a commonsense approach to life that we are always being exhorted to follow. ‘If you want to get on, then this is what you do. This is the path that success in this world suggests.’ Jesus knows this, and can see that what Peter is suggesting makes absolute sense, and because Jesus is human that makes it even more tempting. But Jesus’ vision goes beyond this world. To those who want to follow him then, his vision is not found in logical life progressions. If we want to know what Jesus has planned for us then this only comes through listening to him, who may speak to us directly, but more likely by indirectly putting before us ideas where we are called to serve others. That small voice Elijah heard telling us to take a different path.

Life begins to take on a different meaning then. It is not what I can get out of life, but how my life can be of service to God. Making this choice is where St. Paul is going when he says: ‘It is not my life that I live now, that has died with Jesus on the cross, it is now Jesus who lives in me.’ Strong words, but he is trying to express what it means to surrender our lives to God, who gave them to us in the first place.

Sometimes in discussion we may ask people what they do or are about to do, or ask a young person what they hope to do later in life, and sometimes they say something that strikes us as quite crazy. Before we leap in to deride them, let’s pause and ask ourselves, ‘Is this crazy or is this God’s plan?’

Perhaps the ‘craziness’ has come to us in that small voice. We have been seduced in Jeremiah’s language and like the women in ‘Made in Dagenham,’ or Malala Yousafai before the UN, we find ourselves doing something we thought we never could.