

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 10th October - HOLY DISTURBANCE

I cannot switch off from Joseph. He has inched his way into my soul. He comes to the presbytery on a Saturday around four. He smells, he shouts, he stares. He is a heavy drinker, a gambler, and has frequent brushes with the Law. He barges into every conversation I try to have with parishioners before and after Mass. He mutters obscenities and will not be silenced. He rings me at all hours of the day and night. He wants me to vouch for his purchase somewhere in the city, of a pair of shoes, of a Daniel O'Donnell or Marilla Ness video, of an anorak.

My heart sinks when he presses the door-bell continuously some time before evening Mass. I'm folding the newsletters or snatching a brief nap. He staggers through the door in a storm of blame. "Celtic should have drawn with Rangers, not beaten them" (He had bet on a draw.) "Kieran Fallon should have used the whip in the 2.30 at Cheltenham." (His horse came fourth.) "Fr So and So is turning against me; he told me to get lost last Sunday." (He had lost a fruitful source of revenue.)

Boundaries have little meaning for Joseph. "No drinking in the kitchen," I warn in a hard voice, and Joseph smiles indulgently. "No shouting during Mass" and Joseph nods his head understandingly. I have lost my temper with Joseph - often. In my exasperation I have used intemperate language with him that I have deeply regretted. In some kind of extreme frustration I once chased him through the streets around our church to get rid of him - me, desperate; him, stubborn and defiant.

Yet, in spite of all of this, I just cannot understand how Joseph has wrapped himself around my soul. I see him at two levels. On the one hand, I do not judge those who have no time for him. Part of me agrees with those who refuse to have any truck with him. He spends what he gets on drink. His rudeness should not be tolerated in any church. He frightens people and may well dissuade them from coming to Mass. He makes parishioners feel decidedly uncomfortable. Maybe because he reminds them of something in themselves that they find unacceptable.

On the other hand, there is something about Joseph that makes me see him as Jesus Christ. This fact may come across to people as strange or shocking. And it is! But sometimes we misread the raw and uncompromising vision of his mission that Jesus repeated so often. The weekly gathering of the faithful is not meant to be just about a neighbourly, warm gathering of local Catholics. It is more than a parochial, domestic coziness that worships without any sense of sacrifice. It is about a radical turning upside-down of what our respectable society regards as acceptable.

Some months ago, during Mass, I noticed some unusual activity going on down in the body of the church. Joseph had barged up through the pews and created quite a racket at the candelabra during the consecration. A few able-bodied worshipers had eased him out into the street. The Mass continued in peace and quiet - with no disturbance, no irritant, nothing but the usual, mechanical routine. In one sense the incident was but a passing moment. And yet I felt it to be a significant one too. I shared my thoughts with the congregation before the last blessing.

It comes as a surprise to our parishioners when the counter-cultural nature of the Eucharist is revealed. Its prophetic dimension, almost by definition, has to be rejected. It is too shocking. But, 2000 years later, how can this still be so? After all, we have spent our lives reading and listening to the words of Matthew 25, to the Beatitudes, to the stories about the Pharisee and the Publican, the cup of cold water.

It is one thing to make a fuss over disabled people who are neat and tidy, who call out our compassion, whose wheel-chairs we gladly push while they thank us cheerfully for doing so. Joseph is different. Yet the

truly Christian Sunday Eucharist would place him in the front seat. It would honour him as the special guest. It would cherish him as a perfect example of the *anawim* of the Scriptures – those despised, marginalised and often hated members of a society intent on destroying them. Such are the people that Jesus lived, loved and died for. Such are the people that Jesus placed before everyone else. And such are the people whose feet we, today, are called to wash. Warts and all, Joseph is the litmus test of our faith.

*His body doubled under the pack
that sprawls untidily on his old back,
the cold, wet deadbeat plods up the track.*

*The cook peers out: "O curse that old lag
here again with his clumsy swag
made of a dirty old turnip bag."*

*"Hey Cook, bring him in from the gray smelly street;
put silk on his body, slippers on his feet;
give him fire and bread and meat.
Let the fruit be plucked and the cake be iced,
the bed be snug and the wine be spiced
in the old cove's nightcap - for this is Christ." (R. Mason)*

Joseph travels a long way to visit us. I often try to fob him off by leaving him in the kitchen with a cup of coffee (3 sugars) and a rough sandwich (no cheese). But within minutes he is following me down the corridor, into the sacristy, around the altar. And he is talking, talking, talking - about the price of a pint in The Fox and Hounds, the reduction on chicken-curry at Asda, the greyhound, horse or priest who left him down. Joseph is officially barred from betting-shops, off-licenses and video-stores all over the city. He spills it all out without embarrassment or guilt.

There is a shocking innocence about Joseph. He may be feckless and reckless but he is not two-faced or devious. I sometimes think he only wants to be listened to, to be respected as a human being, to be understood. Sometimes the veil slips and I have glimpsed this other, tender side of Joseph. Out of the corner of my eye, I have twice noticed Joseph pausing for a moment from his restless ranting and pacing around the church. For some reason his attention was caught by the slanting light on a statue or on the intricate Pugin reredos over the altar. His face changed and he looked as though he was trying to remember something elusive, something from another time and another land – maybe the time and land of his childhood.

A few weeks ago, after evening Mass, he was once again setting out into the dark to catch his bus 'home'. It was then that Joseph, 'the least of these my people', the butt of the world's jokes and anger, turned to me. "You know," he said, a peculiar, impish little smile transforming his ravaged face into its lost youthfulness, "people miss me when I'm not around. I feel very loved tonight."

(Tablet article)