

Daniel's Reflection for week beginning 3rd June - Safe Haven for the Lost

On a dangerous stretch of coast where shipwrecks often occurred there was once a small lifeboat station. It consisted of just one hut, one boat, a makeshift lighthouse and a few devoted members who kept a constant watch over the sea. Many lives were saved.

The turning point came when the original vision was gradually lost by new and less inspired members. They appointed and trained new crew members, drew up an instruction manual and also a code of dress and behaviour. The new expensively refurbished lifeboat station with its huge flagpole instead of the small lighthouse became a popular gathering place for its members, a sort of club. The focus of attention became the running of the new club, with fewer members interested in risking their lives in times of danger.

When a ship was wrecked on the coast some still faithful members brought in a boatload of half drowned people who were sick and dirty with black and other coloured skins. They were seen as a threat to the spotless new image of the new station. An element of fear, exclusion and control crept in. The next meeting there was a severe split among the members. Most of them wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities which were seen as a hindrance to the normal life of what had now become a privileged institution.

When the church, like the lifeboat station forgets the original vision, it quickly loses its way. The church exists to reveal the light that protects us when we struggle in the dark. It is there to point the way towards the true shores of our hearts, to light our way home. It is there to remind us of who we are and of who we can be.

The church, like Jesus, is meant to measure us at our tallest, to celebrate our divinity from the moment of our birth, to keep our focus on the beckoning horizons of possibility. It traces for us the hidden shape of God in all creation, the smile of God in all religions, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in a world called the body of God. The church is there to reveal to us another courageous way of living, a way of believing in the light while it is still dark.

The Pentecost spirit is stifled, the Gospel is domesticated, the prophet is silenced. As a mother holds her child closely when teaching about the hard lessons of life, the church of Jesus is called to be present to us in the same way. We are all failed human beings. Too often we have spoiled what love is and damaged precious lives in the process. The church is there to gather us close in our sinfulness, to tell us that it is possible to start all over again, to show us how our pain can be the saving of us. If we are not shown by mother Church how to make our wounds into sacred wounds, we invariably become bitter. If we are not sensitively drawn to find grace at the heart of our pain, the very heart will go out of us.

Our image of the God we have preached is too small. So is our understanding of Church and sacraments. The promises of our Saviour were never meant for entitlement, for the privileged of those who belong to any given institution. They are there as lighthouses for the lost, lifeboat stations for all who are desperate, beacons of pure love for those who are truly poor in their deepest being.

It is high time for another Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is too surprising, elusive and totally unpredictable to be contained in any institution. Like the wind she is utterly free - free to sing of a God who has no favourites, who is passionate about our humanity, forgets our sins and carries to safe haven every single one of her children.

We are already saved. We do not have to beg for such graces anymore. We are all forgiven already for everything. The time and the task now is to believe those amazing graces, thank God for them and then to heal and empower others by reminding them of their own fragile beauty, yet their immense power. This is the emerging Church we are called to nourish anew. It is starting to blossom from within our hearts and our homes. Its seeds have always been with us...

(Abridged version of a Tablet article)