

Sermon for Monday of Holy Week: stability Jn 1.10-13

I am taking advantage of the Covid-19 lockdown to reacquaint myself with some old films – watched again Groundhog day, where Bill Murray plays the most superficial and selfish of men who wakes one drab Pennsylvania morning and plods through his day encountering wearisome people....only to wake the next day to find that the exact same day repeats itself, beginning with Sonny and Cher's whining rendition of "I've got you babe". Bill Murray is stuck in the same 24 hrs, day after day. So oppressive does this become that he repeatedly attempts suicide – jumping from a high rise building, throwing himself under a train, only to wake once again the next day to Sonny and Cher. He becomes desperate to find meaning amid the boredom, tries criminal activity and other scandalous preoccupations he had previously avoided, all to no relief. Eventually he embarks on a path of self-improvement, takes up the piano, memorises poetry, takes care of those around him and those for whom he once had contempt become valuable, meaningful, cherished. Only then does he break free of the wheel of eternal return. This is one of the stories of the modern world – breaking free of pain, anguish and emptiness by heroic self-improvement – take charge of your life, transform yourself into someone worth loving and make meaning for yourself.

And underneath is the notion our culture teaches us – to describe ourselves as mostly our self-creation. Notice how we're trained to describe ourselves; "I was born in Bolton to two loving if unusual parents, raised in a middle class environment infected with consumerism and secularism, but even at an early age I began to question"... See? Our culture teaches us to describe ourselves as mostly self-contrived.

Christianity says this is a lie. And the Benedictine theme of stability also says this is a lie. Because stability is not merely about being consistent – if it were that it would be as godless as Groundhog day. Rather, as Archbishop Anthony Bloom suggested, stability is about realising God is present and active and rooting ourselves more and more in this presence and activity.

This is a bit different from Groundhog day and you see it everywhere in scripture. Saul, who had a successful and admired life as the Pharisee of the Pharisees, who had arrived at a truly meaningful life killing Christians, Saul was blinded by light on the Damascus Road, overtaken by, as C.S.Lewis put it, "the unrelenting approach of Him who I earnestly desired not to meet". Or young Isaiah in the temple, out of habit perhaps, just trying to stay awake during the service when suddenly the heavens open and he sees, hears God Almighty. Or Mary, looking forward to settling down with Joseph and a regular family life, overtaken by the horrendous and compelling invitation to be the God-bearer. In these stories there's no making meaning for oneself, no self-improvement programme, no history; rather there is a God who shows up and in so doing begins to effect the transformation of a self into that which the self could never have been on its own.

And stability is what Jesus offers too, not least on Palm Sunday. He enters Jerusalem and crosses the path of the Roman authorities, the religious leaders and the fickle crowds; this is about God showing up and providing the possibility of a transformation of human beings into that which human beings could never have been on their own. The invitation to stability.

And what do they do? They resist because of course they already have constructed a version of themselves and of their social relationships that can only find Jesus profoundly

threatening...which of course, He is. Holy Week can be framed indeed as the refusal of finding our stable identity, our stability, in Jesus but rather in all sorts of self-constructed, shaky and inherently unstable versions requiring defence, violent assertion and exclusion if our fragile sense of self is to be sustained.

And we resist the stability Jesus offers, because being drawn into immediate relationship with God is - uncomfortable. Theoretically it should be a delight, and the Psalms sing of it, of God's rule coming over the whole created order, God's exquisite, impartial attention to every single person and thing. BUT, God drawing near inevitably involves judgement - where evil is exposed and whatever is hateful to God is exposed for healing. I sometimes wonder at the frequency with which we pray for the presence of the Lord, given that it will inevitably be experienced as a pressure that is painful. It is painful to catch glimpses of ourselves as God must see us painful to take offence at attitudes and behaviours that we formerly took for granted in ourselves, painful to take deeper offence at ourselves than we do others. Yet we feel God's mercy precisely in the pain of self-offence, for it is a sign that God has indeed drawn near.

When Benedict in his Rule reflects on stability, he mentions 3 practical implications. Honesty, accountability and peacefulness. When God in Jesus invites, requires, demands that we shape ourselves according to His presence and activity – becoming stable – that will inevitably involve becoming more honest about where we are and the journey to travel, as well as requiring us to be accountable to putting aside those destabilising, self-centred agendas. And it involves peacefulness because it requires us to engage in conflict in ourselves and with others on the way, without despair, without rivalry or violence, but in a spirit of solidarity fostering mutual dignity, respect and trust.

And how do we know we are beginning to realise that stability? Well maybe because, as our gospel reading says, we are slowly beginning to bear some family resemblance to Jesus – becoming the children of God, born not of blood or the will of the flesh or of man, but of God.

How do we know we are beginning to realise that stability? Well, maybe like Joseph, Peter, Paul and others we are re-narrating our lives in ways which issue in forgiveness, gratitude and compassion.

How do we know we are beginning to realise that stability? Maybe because we've begun to realise only God knows the self I'm meant to be, only God knows the self I shall be by God become; only God can give me a self worth having. And God does, in those surprising moments when we're proceeding down our accustomed ruts, just busy looking after ourselves and there is, as if out of nowhere, light, a summons, a voice, a dusty figure wandering into town which we know sings true.