

Friday (St. John Henry Newman)

If, then, faith be the essence of a Christian life, and if it be what I have now described, it follows that our duty lies in risking upon Christ's word what we have for what have not, and doing so in a noble generous way, not indeed rashly or lightly, still without knowing either what we give up, nor again what we shall gain; uncertain about our reward, uncertain about our extent of sacrifice, in all respects leaning, waiting upon Him, trusting Him to fulfil His promise, trusting in Him to enable us to fulfil our own vows, and so in all respects proceeding without carefulness or anxiety about the future.

Scripture (Hebrews 10:32-39)

Remember the great challenge of the sufferings that you had to meet after you received the light by being publicly exposed to humiliations and violence. You accepted with joy being stripped of your belongings, knowing that you owned something that was better and lasting. Do not lose your fearlessness now, then, since the reward is so great. You will need perseverance if you are to do God's will and gain what He has promised.

martben1@btinternet.com

33rd Week of Ordinary Time

Most certainties are not to be trusted

If I was standing with those admiring the huge and imposing Temple, (Luke 21:5-19), and heard Jesus say that one day not one stone would be left standing on another, I would probably have agreed with him in the same way I agree with scientists who say that one day the sun will burn out – true, but so far in the future, it's no concern to me and I can treat the sun as permanent. I think that the Jewish audience would not just take the size of the Temple as making it reliable, but also the fact that his was where God dwelt on earth: surely that meant it was something that wasn't going to change? At least not until Judgement Day. Jesus, however, talks about the destruction before the end – everything they have taken as certain will be shaken, but they will have to continue. He is picking up what he said in Lk 19:44, referring to the destruction of the Temple in 487BC, which, with hindsight the Jewish people saw as being a consequence of their complacency about, and rejection of, God's covenant. Within 40 years of Jesus' death, the Temple – and Jerusalem – would be destroyed again, and there will be a time of famine, wars, earthquakes and, for Jesus' followers, persecution from both religious and secular powers.

The disasters are 'signs from heaven', and the persecution will be 'on account of my name'. Somehow, it seems that all the old certainties and foundations are to be shaken – by God? Seeing as the reason Jesus was rejected was because the authorities could not accept him as the Messiah, the one who came to bring in the new Covenant, it seems logical that his followers will also be rejected; it also seems clear from Jesus' instructions that God will continue to work away, it will be "your opportunity to bear witness". Many of the early Christians were left wondering where God was and had the plan gone wrong when the persecutions seemed to be wiping out the fragile early church: this wasn't how they expected it to be or, to put it another way, this wasn't how they expected God to act. Yet it was precisely in the heart of the persecution that God would act, through them, ("I myself will give you an eloquence and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to match.").

As we are not, in this country, having to face persecution, it would be tempting to think 'we're ok for now; there's time', assumptions which would very quickly become me relying on the 'certainties' of a well-established society and belief system, and losing any real sense of urgency. When the author of the Book of Malachi warned 'the day is coming' and talked of the proud and the arrogant being cast down, he was talking in a time when things were going pretty well for the Jewish people - so well, and so comfortably that they had become very casual in their relationship with God. Their offerings were distinctly shabby and their thinking the same: they found keeping their part of the covenant all a bit wearisome and inconvenient; they saw the proud and the corrupt acting with impunity and growing rich, so they assumed God was either indifferent or powerless.

This seems relevant to our secular society, yet Jesus would clearly say the same: don't be distracted by the values which so many take as true and lasting, or the 'messiahs', political and otherwise, who offer plausible routes to peace and prosperity, (their peace, their fulfilment); this is your opportunity to bear witness' to the presence of him risen and the very different values of the Kingdom he established. Martin Bennett

Monday (Franz Jaegerstaetter: farmer executed for refusing to fight in Hitler's army).

Does one then no longer want to see Christians who are still able to take a stand in the midst of darkness in deliberate clarity, calmness and confidence – who in the midst of tension, gloom, selfishness and hatefulness, stand fast in perfect peace and cheerfulness – who do not merely watch to see what friends will do, but instead only ask themselves “What does our faith teach us about all this?”

Scripture (John 15:18-21)

If the world hates you, you must realise that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you do not belong to the world, because my choice of you has drawn you out of the world, that is why the world hates you. Remember the words I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too; if they kept my word, they will keep yours as well. But it will be on my account that they do all this to you, because they do not know the one who sent me.

Tuesday (Related by Fr. Tom Cullinan, OSB)

A priest visited Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition in Burma, who was under house arrest. Before he was allowed in, he had to allow himself to be searched and to surrender his passport to the soldiers who were guarding the house. It was clear that they could, and readily would, act with the impunity of a people who have complete power. Inside, he asked Aung San Suu Kyi how she managed to keep going under such constant intimidation, confessing that he had found the experience deeply worrying, not to mention frightening. Aung San Suu Kyi replied “I don't know how anyone who is a Christian can ever be afraid of anything.”

Scripture (Ecclesiasticus 2:1-6)

If you aspire to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal. Be sincere of heart, be steadfast, and do not be alarmed when disaster comes. Whatever happens to you, accept it, and in the uncertainties of your humble state, be patient, since gold is tested in the fire and chosen in the furnace of humiliation. Trust Him and He will uphold you, follow a straight path and hope in Him.

Wednesday (Thomas a Kempis)

Stand firm in all circumstances. Do not judge by outward appearances or reports as people do, but in each instance enter like Moses into the Tabernacle, to ask guidance of the Lord. For Moses always had recourse to prayer to support him amidst the dangers and wickedness of men. Similarly you must take refuge in the depths of your heart, and pray most earnestly for God's help.

Scripture (Psalm 37:1-6,18-19)

Do not get heated about the wicked or envy those who do wrong. Quick as the grass they wither, fading like the green fields. Put your trust in the Lord and do right, make your home in the land and live secure. Make the Lord your joy and he will give you your heart's desires. Commit your destiny to God, be confident in him, and he will act, making your uprightness clear as daylight, and the justice of your cause as the noon. The lives of the just are in the Lord's care, their birthright will endure for ever; they will not be put to shame when bad times come.

Thursday (Fr. Richard Rohr.)

Rising and dying are closely related. Despair, I suspect, is another kind of dying and another kind of pain. It is not so much the loss of persons as the loss of ideals, visions and plans. We are forced to let go of images. Spiritual growth is the willing surrender of images in favour of True Images. It seems that many people, religious people in particular, would sooner relate to images than to the reality where both despair and God lie hidden. Until we walk with this despair we will never uncover the real hope on the other side of human achievement.

Scripture (Luke 21:12-15,17-19)

You will be seized and persecuted; you will be handed over to the synagogues and to imprisonment, and brought before kings and governors for the sake of my name – and that will be your opportunity to bear witness. Make up your minds not to prepare your defence, because I myself will give you an eloquence and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to resist or contradict. You will be hated universally on account of my name, but not a hair of your head will be lost. Your perseverance will win you your lives.