

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time – June 20th 2021
A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Tempest of the Heart

About ten years ago we celebrated the Year of Faith and the logo chosen as a symbol of the times was the boat tossed about in a storm, today’s Gospel, Mark 4:35-41. In this series of Sunday Reflections, we have already referred to the problems of the Church on several occasions, so let us change our focus today to the storms and turbulence that we might experience as individuals. Giuseppe Verdi in his opera *Il Trovatore* composed a wonderful aria known in English as Tempest of the Heart, a song filled with hope for a joyful future after years of Winter’s frown.

Lockdown

We have lived with Winter’s frown for more than a year. The restrictions on normal life during the lockdowns of the past year have been very painful for many people. You may have missed your workplace, colleagues, normal recreation and social life. Keeping energetic children occupied must have been very difficult. Some people really missed going to church. And hanging over everything was the fear of family members contracting the Covid-19 virus. It has been a continual task to keep temper under control, keeping head above water in a sea of despondency, trying to be cheerful and positive at times of deep inner struggle.

Storms in the subconscious mind

For many years my main ministry was preaching retreats or directing individuals on retreat. While no two people are exactly the same, a certain pattern often emerged when the initial peace and joy of the retreatant changed into frustration or dryness. The days of peace and tranquillity allowed the mind to listen to its deeper parts and what was now coming to the surface was not always pleasant. Henri Nouwen, a very busy priest-lecturer-writer-guide, decided to spend one entire summer in the quietness of a Trappist monastery. The first few days offered a great release from the pressures of work and the invasive noises of contemporary life. But after a few days his feelings changed. This is how he described it in his diary: “The first thing we discover in solitude is our restlessness, drivenness, compulsiveness, the urge to act quickly, to make an impact, to have an influence”. That was his experience as a compulsive activist. For other people, the space of solitude will be taken over in different ways such as deeply seated feelings of loneliness, unattended grief, inadequacy, fear, anxiety, sexual compulsions, festering anger or frustrations. Identifying the root of the problem is the first step towards healing. After respectful listening, the retreat director will usually offer readings from Sacred Scripture as a means of being open to the light of God’s word. So, let us return to the narrative of the stormy sea in today’s Gospel.

Jesus was asleep

How could anybody sleep through the turbulence and shouting while the boat was close to sinking? Yet Jesus was in the stern, his head on the cushion, asleep. There is a lesson for us here. It often happens when people are experiencing the tempest of the heart, they pray and plead with God but it seems that God is asleep. When Jesus did eventually wake up, he rebuked the wind as he would act in casting out an evil spirit. “Quiet now! Be calm!” And the wind dropped and all was calm again. Then he asked the disciples, “Why are you so frightened? How is it that you have no faith?”

It's easy for me sitting at my desk to say that faith tells us that God is always watching us. As a popular song puts it, "God is watching, at a distance." But for a person in deep darkness or turbulence all these nice words may offer no comfort.

Three pieces of advice

Is there any advice one can give? If the person wants to let fly in anger against God, my advice is to let fly. Some of the sacred psalms show us how to give out to God. We wouldn't be giving out if we did not believe that we expected more from God. Angry prayer is honest prayer. It invariably happens that, when peace of mind returns, the one who was angry is now humbly apologising to God! Another piece of advice, if the person is calm enough to listen, is to recall what Saint Paul said that when we do not know how to pray, then the Spirit of God within us prays in ways that cannot be put into words. Hand it over to the Holy Spirit to do the job on our behalf.

Another piece of advice comes from the gospel story where the friends of a crippled man stripped the roof off a house to bring their friend to Jesus. If you are in deep darkness and feel that you cannot pray, is there any person you can contact to pray in your name? Even if no name comes to mind, remember that you are part of the body of Christ which is the Church, and at any given moment there are people at prayer in your name. You may not know them, but you have many faith friends who are carrying you, poor cripple, through the roof to God. There are many contemplative orders of men and women whose lives are dedicated to prayer. These people keep the flame of faith burning at all times.

Prayer

Mindful of God's eternal love, we pray.

The Church is a boat on stormy seas at the moment. May we never lose faith in the presence of the Lord, even when it seems that he is asleep.

When our lives are tossed about in turmoil, may we draw hope and courage as we remember that God, our loving Creator, is always holding us in his loving hand.

And we pray for people who have lost hope. May the light of God's love shine in their darkness.

Loving Father, hold us in the palm of your hand as we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your Beloved Son, our Lord. Amen