

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – August 7th 2022

A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Faith in Light and Darkness

“Character, like a photograph, is developed in darkness.” So said Yousuf Karsh, the great portrait photographer, who had extraordinary ability in balancing light and darkness to portray not only the outer visage but also the inner character of his subject.

All three Readings on this Sunday touch on the theme of faith persevering through the dark nights. The Book of Wisdom (18:6-9) recalls the night when the Hebrew people prepared for their escape from slavery in Egypt and the long journey to become a free people in a land of their own. They were led by a cloud by day and a flame by night. The human eye could not take the full light of God’s glory so, mercifully, it was shaded by a cloud ... later called the Cloud of Unknowing. Then in the full darkness of night there was always a flame to lead them. Faith brings light on the meaning of life, what to believe in, and a code of morality. Yet there are mysteries to be lived with and questions we cannot answer ... the darkness of faith.

The testing of Abraham

In our Second Reading (Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19), the life of Abraham is the model of the journey of faith. On the strength of God’s word, he left the security of home for the promise of many descendants. He experienced seven blessings (light) and ten times of testing (darkness). He and Sara had no children, let alone the many descendants they were promised. Then Sara, long past the normal age, carried a child. They called him Isaac, a name meaning the smile of God. Some years later, Abraham was asked to sacrifice this boy who was the smile of God in his life. When the boy asked where the lamb for sacrifice was, Abraham answered, “God will provide”. His belief in God’s promise never wavered in any time of testing.

Stages of growth

Today’s Gospel (Luke 12: 32-48) begins with the promise of Jesus. “There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom”. But just like the journey of Abraham, the possession and enjoyment of this kingdom will be in the future. The disciples were told to seek this kingdom as a great treasure, being dressed for action, with their lamps lit.

Saint Paul had a great insight into the growth of faith. “When I was a child I thought and reasoned like a child, but when I grew up, I gave up childish ways. Now we see dimly, as in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). Mirrors in his day were made of metal and provided a very poor image. Faith is the preparation for the full knowledge of God, called the beatific vision.

As in the stages of human growth, faith develops through the stages of childhood, adolescence and maturity. These stages of spiritual growth do not necessarily correspond to a person’s age.

Childlike faith is uncomplicated. It is very clear and totally certain. It is simple and sure, accepting what is handed down without question.

Adolescent faith (which may be at any age) is quite unclear and very uncertain. There are many doubts and questions. It is obscure and uncertain.

Mature faith can cope with obscurity (darkness) while remaining certain. There may be many questions but this house is built on the solid rock of God’s promise, like the staunch faith of Abraham. When Saint John Henry Newman converted to the Catholic Church, he lost many friends and his link with Oxford University. In writing about it he said, “Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt.”

Darkness is necessary for growth

In the darkness of faith, one finds it impossible to focus attention in prayer, or on any image or thought. Consolations are absent and feelings are dried up. But God is present in the darkness as much as in

clear daylight. Is God absent in the garden during winter? Not for one second but working in a different way. Frost breaks the fallen leaves into compost and plants need darkness as well as light.

Thomas Merton noted that in the daylight we can see the objects all around us but it is only in the dark of night that we can see the distant stars. Darkness stretches our vision. We would too easily settle for mediocre satisfactions unless God shook us up and stretched our desires for what today's Gospel calls the treasure that will not fail you. A wise spiritual director can help one to discern whether the darkness is due to tiredness or sinfulness or the Holy Spirit.

There is a vast body of literature by mystical writers on darkness in the spiritual life. One of the best exponents was Saint John of the Cross. "Do not be satisfied with what you understand about God. Nourish yourself instead on what you do not understand about Him. Do not base your happiness or delight on what you may hear or feel of him, but rather on what you can neither feel nor hear. The less one understands, the closer one gets to Him."

Remember that Jesus, the light of the world, experienced the darkness of his agony in Gethsemane and his cry of dereliction on Calvary, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me". He entered into total solidarity with us, like us in all things, so that we might know he is always with us.

Even Mary, his mother, did not understand what her Son meant in saying that he would have to be busy in his Father's affairs. What did Simeon mean by the sword of sorrow that would pierce her heart? She pondered on these sayings as she went forward under that cloud of unknowing.

Many of the saints experienced great darkness and dryness. Saint Teresa of Kolkata went through forty years without any consolations in prayer. Only her spiritual director knew about it. She had experienced one vision when the Lord repeated his words on Calvary, "I thirst". She understood her aridity as a sharing with Jesus, particularly in his thirst for souls, as he showed at the well in Samaria.

In times of darkness let us keep our lamps lit by continuing to give time to prayer. Be dressed for action like Mother Teresa by serving Christ in caring for the needy.

"Character, like a photograph, is developed in darkness".

Prayer from a concentration camp

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.

I believe in love even when I feel it not.

I believe in God even when He is silent.