Father Ed’s Sunday Reflection  
June 21  
(continued)

Clearly he felt that Christianity should not intrude on the society he kept, nor put obstacles in the pursuit of any pleasure that attracted him. This could easily be a description of the Christianity of many of us here and now also. While we are quite prepared to admit that we are Christians, we are, by and large, careful not to take religion too seriously. I think it’s fair to say that rarely do we in any practical way so shape our lives according to our religious beliefs, that they offer and reprimand, however silent, to people who live by totally different standards.

A genuine Christian cannot fully escape Christ’s call to be different from the world. What he asks us is not to conform to the standards of this world, but rather to transform those standards. St Paul thought of Sin entering this world through one man, Adam, and through sin death, so that death has spread throughout the whole human race, because sin is so universal. The world’s greatest sin is unbelief, and the task of the Church is to challenge this unbelief, relying on the help of the Holy Spirit. The last words of Jesus, according to St Matthew, were, “Go and make disciples of people everywhere; baptise them and teach them to observe all that I taught you. And I am with you always, yes to the end of time.”

While we live in this world, we are meant to remain aware of the world to come, and live for God by pursuing the standards Jesus set for us. When the Apostles worried about the future, Christ encouraged them, “Don’t be afraid. I am with you always.” The deepest truth about God that Jesus taught is that he is a caring God, compassionate and forgiving, a God who is on our side. Our attitude to life can be that of the psalmist who says, “In God I trust – I shall not fear” (Ps 56:1. The only thing to fear is losing God, loss of trust in God. This lack of trust begins when I look for security through my own efforts, in the works and wealth of my own making. Jesus criticised the feverish efforts, the anxious haste and worry of those worldly people, who refuse to grant God any part in their lives. “In God I trust; I shall not fear.”

Jesus himself on the night of his last Passover, was about to suffer more than anyone had ever suffered, or ever will suffer in time to come. Yet, he remained affectionate and caring towards his friends and shared the meal with them, even the one who was plotting his betrayal. Later in Gethsemane when the terror of what lay ahead caused his sweat to fall like great drops of blood, his prayer was still, “Not my will but yours be done.” No matter how awful the future may seem, this should be our prayer and our spirit too.

Jeremiah laments his hardship as a prophet (first reading), and Jesus asks his followers to be brave in promoting their faith (Gospel). They imply that all members of the People of God are potentially prophetic and need to play their part in handing on the truth about God. In a sense, we
are all successors to Jeremiah and to the apostles whose job it was to share Christ’s message with the world.

Not all Christians have equal opportunities of being spokespersons for God. Bishops and priests have the official duty of encouraging and teaching the faithful. Their difficult but worthwhile task is to faithfully hand on Christ’s teaching, and correct errors that threaten the integrity of the traditional Christian doctrine or ethical standards. Like Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets, they remind their people of God’s revealed will and of the high moral standards God asks of us. And, like the prophets, priests can often expect criticism and opposition, just for doing their job.

Theologians too have an important work to fulfil in the Church, to deeply study the revealed truth, and then blend that traditional teaching with modern knowledge, so as to honestly apply the Christian message to new problems. To help them in this daunting work they have the light of the same Holy Spirit who guided the prophets of old, provided they do their research not as masters but as servants of the word of God. But it is not only priests and theologians who have the prophetic role towards God’s people. The Second Vatican Council taught that every Christian should give a living witness to Christ, at least through living a life of faith and charity and by joining in worship and prayer.

This is not such an easy matter. The spirit of today’s society, the example of our contemporaries, and the irreligious mood of much of the media do not always foster God-fearing attitudes or encourage sound moral standards. In most countries today, Christians are not persecuted for showing faith in Christ and his Gospel, but when she or he lives according to this teaching they will be swimming against the tide of a materialistic culture and will not find the going easy. Jesus warns that being a Christian will cost sacrifice and suffering. We are bound to face opposition from a world that does not gladly submit to the word of God, that makes so many demands on human nature. But there is real satisfaction, too, in standing up for the truth of things. In the centre of their souls, prophetic people have the happiness of working with the Lord, who is the ultimate truth on whom we all depend.

Wherever you go, I shall go/ Wherever you live, there shall I live/ Your people will be my people/ And your God will by my God, too. This promise of fidelity from the book of Ruth reminds us that Christ will live and go with us, wherever we live and wherever we go. But it also invites us to care for people because they are his people, too. Christ asks each disciple to be his partner in the work that God the Father sent him to do in this world. And he promises to be our partner, whatever our work, whatever kind of life we live, wherever we go. We follow him, trusting that he is with us, not just for a moment, but for the whole of our lives. Wherever we go, however we live, “the Lord is at my side.” His commitment to us is lifelong despite our own inability to think of him always, or even despite our occasional thoughtless rejection of him. The mystery of God’s call to us and of our response to him is that he is always there for us. “I am at your side; you are my friends,” said Jesus, even to disciples who sometimes lose the way.

“Wherever you go, I shall go.” If we take those words to heart we can accept the risk of going out to others in his name. In saying “yes” to our life as Christian disciples, we can, like Jeremiah, go forward in a zigzag fashion, going somewhere, but not always directly or in a predictable
manner. “Do not be afraid,” Christ said and still says. Christ is not for the fearless but for those who must control their fears. Neither is he for the perfect but for those who need his word of forgiveness. If this ideal of going the journey of life with Christ seems beyond our reach, remember how once said to his friends, “With men it is impossible but not with God; for all things are possible with God.” I follow Christ best when I realise that the gospel ideal is beyond the reach of my own strength. It is then that I can lean on him and build on the strength of the Lord who is always at my side.

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