

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

21 JUNE 2020

YEAR A

“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Matthew 10:39

Illustration

Many of us will remember the UK TV sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances*, whose heroine Hyacinth Bucket (pronounced “Bouquet”!) took to new heights the activity of being seen to be doing, wearing or saying the right thing. The reason it was funny, of course, was that nearly everyone knew someone with a bit (or a lot) of Hyacinth in them. How many of us, as children, were exhorted by our mother always to wear a clean pair of underpants in case we were knocked down? Surely children everywhere have puzzled over this concern for our underwear. Was keeping up appearances more important, even, than our health and safety?

We may feel we live in a less formal society now but, in honesty, we’ve all felt the pressure of keeping up appearances from time to time, whether it’s trying to say the politically correct thing, or being seen by our friends to have the right type of organic, fair-traded or non-airfreighted food in our cupboards. Oh, these are all good things, but let’s be honest – there is a fine and rather blurry line between being a decent and upstanding member of society and being seen to be one. The pressure to keep up appearances is still there; it always is.

Gospel Teaching

And so it was in first-century Palestine too. There were strict codes of behaviour that had the double-edged effect of both helping people to operate as good citizens by defining what was bad and what was good, but also excluded and labelled those who fell foul of these rules. Jesus upset the applecart, and as a result many vilified him as a lout and troublemaker. His behaviour was seen as defiantly antisocial, and he suffered both verbal and physical persecution as a result.

And so we join the story today at the point where Jesus begins to prepare his disciples to carry on his work (a foretaste, of course, of the task of every Christian), and to suffer the same things that he suffered. To their society the disciples were going to seem like fools, whingers, crackpots and inciters of antisocial behaviour – appearances were definitely not going to be kept up. The very fabric of society would be threatened, and, as a result, they would suffer the same verbal and physical persecution that Jesus did.

Jesus' message to the disciples is that appearances are of the least concern when the integrity of the soul is at stake. Simple! But although Jesus' words are straightforward – retain your respectability and lose your soul – his call not to be afraid shows that he knew that this was not a simple or easy thing to do. The story about the sparrows is surely one of the tenderest in the Gospels, and one that assures the disciples of their worth in a community that would regard them as worthless. Jesus' careful words show that he knew and understood how much the disciples had invested in their society, and how painful it would be to change it. It was their community after all. They may have been poor and lower class, but they were still part of it all. How can it not be painful to challenge that?

Application

Sometimes it seems that we can't win. We do our best to be decent, upright and adhere to the rules of society, and we find ourselves having to face the challenge that all we are doing is keeping up appearances. We try reinterpreting the Gospel to apply it to our life and time and we risk watering the message down; if we take it at face value it seems impossibly disruptive, and to oppose all that we do as we try to be ordinary, decent people.

Well, sadly, there are no easy answers to this, and our challenge as Christian communities, filled with God's Spirit, is to work it out for ourselves. If there is an answer it comes from the uncomfortable place between being a good person and keeping up appearances – from a dialogue between the Pharisee and the radical that is in us all, and from honest conversation with one another about our aspirations and fears.

Jesus knew how painful it was to challenge the values of the community in which you've invested time, effort and love. He knew how much pressure there was on every decent person to keep up appearances. Let us pray for the courage to examine our own hearts honestly and to listen to our radical Lord. The pressure to keep up appearances is strong, but the loving tenderness of our saviour is stronger.