

A Homily for Woodhall Spa on Wednesday in the second week of Lent

This seems a strange pairing of readings. The first, from Jeremiah, might remind us that some people in Matthew's Gospel thought Jesus might be "Jeremiah, or one of the prophets". Jeremiah died in the 6th century before Christ, so his sudden return would have been remarkable to say the least; but their identifying Jesus with Jeremiah must have been a recognition that he was not pleasing to the authorities: it was not the Assyrians who persecuted Jeremiah, but his fellow-Jews.

This reading gives a frame for the last of Jesus' three great predictions of the Passion. We live, in Lent, under the foreboding of this central fact of human history: so let's begin by accepting the proclamation of it once more: *our Lord, whom we follow, will go to the Cross, and we must come stumbling after him in the half-light of our dimmed understanding.*

The depth of our inability to hear the prediction is clear in the response of the Twelve. Today we have Matthew trying to temper the blatancy of Mark, who made James and John come to ask for *seats to his right hand and to his left in his glory*. Here Matthew very kindly takes some of the flak from them by hanging the ambition on their poor mother, Mrs Zebedee, who hopes her boys are going to be in the top three when the chips are down.

But the line, *You do not know what you are asking* is carried over from Mark in all its starkness. We know that it's a frequent theme in the Gospels, this theme of ignorance. It isn't just an intellectual ignorance, the not-knowing of important facts: three times the facts are told them. They are in the dark in a big way about the whole mystery of the redemption in which they've been caught up. At its worst it is an ignorance about Jesus, and nothing can help it; they will be *scandalised* by what is going to happen to him. Although they hear his prediction of the Passion, they cannot relate to it or accept its certainty.

Very soon we will be ourselves caught up in what Jesus was discussing with Moses and Elijah in the unbearable light of the Transfiguration: the mysteries of the Christian Exodus, which he accomplishes in Jerusalem. Peter and his companions are practically unconscious in the light at the mountaintop. They *stay awake and see his glory*: but, despite the voice of God telling them to *Listen to Him*, they ignore the second prediction of the Passion too, for Luke tells us

they did not understand his words, for it was hidden from them so that they should not see their meaning, and they were afraid to ask him about what he had said.

and soon they are arguing about which of them was the greatest; nothing could more clearly show that they have not understood about the Cross.

At the Last Supper, John describes how Peter, refusing to have his feet washed, is told:

At this moment you do not know what I am doing. Later you will understand.

Later means, when I have been crucified in your sight, when you have acknowledged three times that you do not know me, and when you have failed to follow me because you do not know where I am going. Mark's Jesus asks James and John whether they can be baptised in the baptism he is facing. This baptism is no Sunday afternoon ritual, but the very mystery of Passover, which is full of dread and total risk.

This reminds me of a whole sequence of sayings in John's Gospel, sayings about unavoidable sacramental moments, inescapable crises of sharing which we must accept, even in our ignorance. Nicodemus is told, *Unless you are born through water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.* The Jews, after the feeding of the multitude, are told, *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you shall have no life in you.* Finally Peter is told, *Unless I wash you, you can have no sharing in me.* All these "unless" moments are moments of misunderstanding: Nicodemus, the Jewish crowd, and Peter all fail to understand what he is saying to them. Despite the Incarnate Lord, full of grace and truth, standing before them, despite his being the Word of God, who enlightens every man who comes into the world, they do not understand.

It is therefore quite clear that, when the truth is borne in on them, they will all find their certainties demolished, their previous understanding overturned, in other words, they will enter into the darkness before they can be granted a share in the light.

As we look over our lives, with the penitential eyes of Lenten pilgrims, we should not be dismayed by our own lack of understanding. Nor should we hammer our brains in the hope of forcing them to conjecture the truth. It isn't a matter merely of the brain. For all of us, the teaching of Jesus will require a wholesale conversion, a turning-over of what we know and cling to, a baptismal death, so that resurrection may follow. Try to find another way: you will be told, *Get behind me, Satan.* Try to move forward on your own terms, with the hesitancy of human thinking, and you will find yourself prevented from understanding what he has said. Those who walk in the Way of the Cross must be prepared for the loss of all certainty, all self-possession, all their authority over their lives: *for anyone who tries to keep his life will lose it: but anyone who loses it for my sake, and the sake of the Gospel, will remain for eternity.*

Unlike the Twelve, we have the lesson-book of the Cross and the Resurrection to guide us. More than that, we have the Holy Spirit to live in our minds and bodies, instructing us how to pray, teaching us where to go, and reminding us of all that Jesus said to us. Lent is a time for letting the Spirit guide us *in sequela Christi* - into the following of Christ. That is why sacrifice is a great lesson to us - the sort that seems to do no good, like fasting, and the sort which surrenders our good for the good of others, like almsgiving, and the kind which makes us into an everlasting gift to God the Father, which is prayer. At the moment, maybe we do not understand. These three good deeds may make room in us for the understanding to be born: that the Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. This is the grace and truth, which can turn our lives from a helpless struggle with darkness, into a hurtling journey into the heart of light.