

Reflection on the Readings for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

When I look back now on my childhood, I find myself not recalling a continuous narrative, but rather a series of snapshots of my younger life, snapshots just like this rather dramatic recalled event ; ... the loud knock on the door startled me, that day had not felt like a normal day, well as much as a seven year old is able to discern a normal day, I had been aware that my mother was on edge all day, it was nearly dark when she opened the door to a tall uniformed man wearing a custodian helmet. This was quite something, very rare that a policeman had come knocking on our door. Policemen were highly regarded authority figures, they were held in awe, this was an event not to be taken lightly. As far as I knew no one else in our street had had a visit from the local 'bobby'. I kept somewhat back in the hallway and couldn't quite hear what was being said, no more than a minute must have passed when I heard my mother thank the local policeman, shut the door and turn to us, that is my sister and I, with a palpable look of relief on her face. Living on the *Magadalen Council Estate*, at Gorleston on Sea, Gt. Yarmouth, in the 1950's meant that no one had telephones and the police were customarily dispatched for the relaying of all serious personal events. The news this policeman told my mother that evening was that my father's operation, at a major hospital in Norwich, to mend his 'broken back' had been successful, he had agreed to a novel insertion of a new disk in his lower spine and had been told that this was experimental and may well result in paralysis. I mention and recall this time in particular because of a rather mundane happenings that followed this family crisis. My father

had a long road to recovery and in those days there was not very much social security support for families like us. Credit to my parents love and care that I didn't realise it during this time but we must have been quite poor. I learned to love baked beans on toast and kippers, despite their myriad tiny bones. Baked beans were cheap and nutritious and kippers helped stretch my mothers tight budget as they only cost her one penny each, and they were good and fresh, straight from being smoked on the Yarmouth quayside. Speaking of the not so dramatic but rather mundane event, I do acutely recall however having to hand in a letter from the local authority which allowed me to have a free school dinner. This I had to do in front of the whole class at the Herman Junior Primary School, and it was, I think, the first time in my life that I felt deprived and different and had that sense of shame of being poor. I was most likely not exceptional but at the time I thought that everyone else could afford to pay the nominal contribution to school milk and dinners, except me.

As an adult I know now that I was engaging in what some might say is unhelpful social comparison. In 1954, just three years prior to my youthful social embarrassment, the psychologist Leon Festinger had published his famous social comparison theories. In summary his theories hold that there is an innate drive within each one of us to gain an accurate evaluation of self in order to define who we are in relation to others. What do I mean by this... well in my ministry with others I have often heard people use expressions which are underpinned by this theory. When people are experiencing pain or loss or unhappiness they quite often use a variation of the expression '*I was unhappy about having no shoes until I met the man who had no feet*'. This perhaps can be seen as an example of downward comparison, an

argument based on relativity, that is, there is always someone worse off than us, so that knowing this helps us better accept the status quo of our own situation. I normally respond by listening carefully and honouring that unique lived experience, I know in my heart and mind that there is no hierarchy for suffering, everyone's feelings are important and should never be negated or even diminished in relation to another's experience.

Having said this, and as aware as I am of the pros and cons of the above mentioned use of downward comparison, there is I think a more troubling aspect of Festinger's theory, but nevertheless just as natural and human. It concerns our predilection for upward comparisons. This is what I most probably unconsciously engaged in as a seven year old child. In upward comparisons, we compare ourselves with those we believe are better off than us in some way. The American President Theodore Roosevelt called this comparison 'the thief of joy.' As an aside I can't help but wonder what he would think about today's social media focused society and the upward comparison pressures faced especially by our young people who struggle for a balanced sense of self in an often confusing world. When I compare these challenges to my own perhaps much simpler uncomplicated childhood I do feel for their struggle. I am also reminded of the challenge we face as a Church to relay the positive message Jesus has to give to our young people in this and other challenging circumstances of their lives.

Thinking about these challenges and looking particularly at today's scripture readings what might we say about an appropriate Christian response to comparison theory and its relevance for us today.

Well for one thing the core scripture message today is the same as it often is in our scriptures and that is firstly the necessity of seeking salvation for all, we are saved so that we can carry out the purpose for which God has us on earth: to share the good news of God's grace and to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world, and secondly looking to Jesus for the way to live our lives, showing God's love through our actions and thirdly when we fail, as we will, closing the loop,... failing yes, but doing so in the knowledge that Jesus came to forgive our failings, our sins, and lead us to salvation. Jesus did this through his atonement, so further we understand that the route to a meaningful life, but not necessarily happier life, has to go through this cross of Christ. Christ is 'The Way' for us, and the cross is where we meet him for the road to our true love and Holiness in him.

That is the theology, now for the praxis; so I offer you my humble opinion about the right kind of social comparison can I think very much help us along the way. Let me share one striking lived example of what I mean by this.

By way of introduction we need to remind ourselves that today that sadly 821 million people around the world will go to bed with an empty stomach, this will be the case tonight and tomorrow night, even though there is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone. Nearly half of all deaths in children under five years of age are attributable in some way to malnutrition and/or just not having enough to eat. Despite making good progress in reducing hunger, the eradication of hunger still remains one of the great challenges of our time. One man in Tasmania is doing what he can to change this situation.

Today in an old church in Burnie, Tasmania, the walls, and tables and pews are covered with a pictorial representation of fifty years of research by one man whose name is Bruce French. In 2016 Bruce was awarded the honour of becoming an Officer of the Order of Australia for his work as a world expert in edible plants. He has managed to catalogue over 31,000 plants, his goal is to catalogue the entire world's edible plants. When asked why he has undertaken such incredible work, this humble man says, "I can't boast in my fancy qualifications, I've worked with the CSIRO and you're supposed to have a master's degree, but they said I'd done enough research. My research first began when I took a trip to Papua New Guinea to teach them how to grow different foods , "I got there and they said, 'don't show us Western foods, we want food that grows here', they ended up teaching me and that's where it all started, helping people feed themselves well with the food already available to them, my aim is to help the hungry of the world and it's all about my Christian faith, I want to practice what I preach." Bruce has pastored two churches in Tasmania, and is guided by a desire to do God's work and is inspired by the Scriptures. He has made it his life's work to teach people how to choose the right plant for the right place as his contribution to feeding hungry children.

Utilised correctly social comparison can lead to Holy Imitation, making comparisons can be how we discover what holiness is when we sense it and what it isn't when we don't. It's how we see what is set apart as distinct from ourselves. It's also how we know what we can be like, but importantly in our own unique God given way. Far from a 'thief of joy' , we can take the example of Bruce French's life, the difference he is making to helping feed the hungry world, and especially the reason he is

motivated to do what he does, and then we can take this whole experience and through it learn more about our understanding of God and of ourselves. However a word of caution... just as it can be unrealistic and even harmful to make upward comparisons with the social media lifestyles of the rich and famous and various opinion influencers, it can be unrealistic and even harmful to make comparisons with people who are paragons of certain positive traits. Just as St Therese of Lisieux struggled with finding meaning for her life and through prayer and experience learnt that she should strive always to just do small things well, so should you and I recognise how unique we are and especially how loved we are for that uniqueness and dignity before God, our way is our own, not someone else's.

We do all this in the knowledge of our first reading that finding meaning may not equate to happiness, as Jeremiah experienced first-hand, his witness meant suffering, the Word of the Lord resulted in derision for his lived experience, hence we must be prepared to take up our cross to follow Jesus. Bruce French's journey has so far taken more than fifty years, it may take a lifetime of discipleship, of trial and error, to gradually allow Jesus to transform our life into his Life. Saint Paul instructs the Romans to not conform themselves to that age, it is also the same valid exhortation for today, we conform ourselves to Jesus in every age, despite knowing that like the prophet Jeremiah we may indeed pay the price for being different, we choose this way willingly because of our faith, for the good of the world and our fellow travellers and for our ultimate goal, the promise of salvation.

All of us live under a unique set of circumstances. We are not static beings, but rather complex characters, growing in different

circumstances with different sets of problems and opportunities. This is why our comparison with the way other people live their lives only goes so far. In my opinion it should be limited to identifying the good principles applied to their lives and if applicable, working out how to apply them to our own lives, within our unique circumstances. We do this in the knowledge that only God can truly judge a person, for only He can judge the heart and mind and observe the entire story, from the beginning and to the end of life. We do this knowing that God is on our side, walking with us, loving and forgiving us when we fail, picking us up when we fall down and tending us along the Way. We do this trusting that this love is something extraordinary and beyond our normal experience and such a love as we can only just begin to imagine!

Until next time take care, God Bless you all.

Jeremiah says "You have seduced me, Lord, and I have let myself be seduced".

Saint Paul says, "Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind".

Jesus says, "...Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it. 'For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and, when he does, he will reward each one according to his behaviour.'"