

A deadly look – a saving look

About twenty years ago, I caught hepatitis and had to spend a month in hospital. A medical consultant was in charge of my case, but the day to day care and treatment were carried out by his three assistants. The course of the sickness did not run smoothly and the three assistant doctors decided that they needed to take a look inside me to see what was going on. On the appointed day, two of them arrived at my room with the equipment for the examination and told me to undress, while they prepared the equipment. I undressed to my under-clothes and stood there waiting, then one turned, looked at me and said, “No, no - naked” and then turned back to what he was doing; so I stripped, naked.

I was forty years of age at the time and that was the first time, since I was a small child, that I had stood naked in front of anyone. I stood there embarrassed and shamed, but this did not seem to be noticed by the two doctors, one of whom then looked at me again and told me to, “Lie on the bed – on your side”. This I did and waited for them to begin their examination. It was then, that the third doctor entered the room; he looked at me lying naked on the bed and went to get a towel, saying to the other two, as he did so, “You could at least have covered the gentleman.” He then covered my nakedness with the towel and, as he did so, mouthed the word: “Sorry”.

Two looks! One, which left me feeling violated and shamed; the other, which gave me back my dignity. One, which locked me into the present as a “thing” to be examined, prodded and poked; the other, which made me more than just a medical problem. One, which saw only what had happened to me; the other, which saw I had a future and opened the door to it.

I had not thought about that incident for a many years, but it came strongly to mind last week as I read the Gospel story of the woman caught in adultery; for she also was caught up in two looks – one, which saw only her past and condemned her – and the other, which looked at “her” and gave her back her life and her future.

The Gospel tells us the woman was made “to stand in full view of everyone” and we can imagine the stares of the crowd, which locked her into her shame. But, the Gospel tells also us that the Lord refused to take part in this; instead, he looked at the ground and wrote in the sand with his finger. When he did look up it was to address her accusers, not her, and to suggest that they also might have a “past” – but he then looked down again at the ground, so as not to condemn even them as they admitted to this “past” by quietly slipping away, one by one. When he did finally look up at the woman it was with a look of compassion - not imprisoning her in her sin, but freeing her so that a better future might grow from the soil of her past.

Most of us do not need others to look at us with the “killing stare” – we are quite capable of doing that to ourselves. When we are ashamed of something, we usually either hide from it or turn on ourselves in condemnation and in both cases imprison ourselves in what we have become. And then, we sometimes go further and imagine that the Lord is also looking askance at us in the same way! I remember once, some years ago, relating such a feeling of self-hate to my spiritual director of the time and saying how the Lord look at me in despair. I remember his reaction and how he told me very forcibly – “the Lord never, ever does that to you. When he looks at you, it is to set you free.”

In the readings, we will listen to during this Holy Week, there are several accounts of such looks. There is the look when he turned to Peter, just after the cock crowed; a look which brought Peter to tears and so gave him a future. There is the look with which he spoke to the thief dying next to him on the cross. Then there is that most moving look with which he speaks to his Mother, giving her into the care of John. All three looks opened the door to the future – and did so in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

Our Sacred Scriptures are not, first and foremost, the written text of the Bible; they are the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The task of these Scriptures is not to tell us what to believe or how to behave – they are there to bring us into the story, into the life of Jesus. They urge us to let the living Lord look at us – not to condemn us for the past we carry, but so that we might may live and that a better future may grow from the soil of our past.

Diary

I enjoyed my visit to England. It was very nice meeting family and friends and also being able to say Mass with the University community which had been my family for the ten years before I came to Bali. However, I noticed that already that community had greatly changed, with many new-comers and many loved faces missing. I then realised that the next time I come home, I will know almost no one among that community – and my family of the last ten years will have gone. However, that is the vocation of the celibate priest – to love and care for people without wishing to hold on to them.

During my time at Reading, I had also said Mass regularly at Our Lady of Peace and they gave me a great welcome when I celebrated Mass with them this time. That community is more permanent and so I have hopes that when I come home again there will still be one community where I am known and welcomed. So, thank you OLOP - you gave me a great welcome!

When I arrived back here in Bali, I was quickly immersed in preparing for the Holy Week ceremonies, for my Parish Priest wants them celebrated in Indonesian and also in English this year – a first - in Indonesian in the main church and in English in the Parish Centre. I am enjoying the challenge of preparing everything from scratch – and this is making me realise how tired I must have been when I first arrived here. I have far more energy now that I did during my first six months. So, my sabbatical seems to be working.

I will have to begin house-hunting again soon after Easter, because it looks as though I will be staying on in Bali after my sabbatical. I am very glad of that, for although I love England and will always enjoy visiting – the people and the place here are taking a claim on my heart – and I am happy that it is so.

Happy Easter to you all,

God bless,

Terry