

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

26.09.2021
By Pádraig Ó Tuama

Introduction

One of the things about a close reading of the gospels — or any text — is that its inconveniences show up. For many who wish to see Jesus as the great reconciler, this week's gospel text is one of those inconveniences.

On the one hand Jesus says “whoever is not against us is for us” and then, a few verses later in the lectionary selection from Mark, he says “It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell to the unquenchable fire.”

How can these two sentences be included in the same sequence of sayings from Jesus' mouth?

This week we'll be considering justice, the long arm of trauma, the necessity of integrity and the work of courage. Mostly, in response to this week's text, I tell a story about being adjacent to one of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. While I don't detail any of the abuses that went on there, it may be that you would prefer to skip this week's reflection if it's a trigger for you.

As we begin this week's reflection, we invite you to take a quiet moment in preparation for the text.

Text

Mark 9:38–50

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in

me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Comment

Many years ago, I worked with a religious organisation. We all lived in a tumble — sometimes happy, sometimes angst-ridden — of Christian community. *Intentional Christian Community* is what people call it these days. It was the 1990s, in Dublin, and we were an ecumenical group.

Our large rambling household — three floors: the bottom floor for offices and meeting rooms and sitting rooms and kitchens; the first floor for women; the second floor for men — was one wing of a convent. The nuns who ran the convent, lived in the main wing, but rented out a few other sections to charities or missionary organisations.

I moved to this community in 1993. The entire block of the convent was huge, only a few miles from Dublin city centre. There had been a farm on the land. There was a graveyard. There were outhouses and old barns, dormitories, gardens, a grotto. There was an old Magdalene laundry on the site too, a huge abandoned building. The laundry had only officially shut down in a few years before I'd moved there.

I started going to daily mass when I lived in this community, and continued for five years. I got to know many of the nuns, as well as many who were called collectively 'the old ladies'.

These women were people who'd been through the atrocious system of Ireland's industrial schools and Magdalene laundries. Most of the women were in their 70s. All single. The story was that they had become so institutionalised through the laundry and reformatory school system that they were not fit for independent living. They lived, now, in a small building development — also on the same block — alongside the nuns. Those who had ruled with rigour now shared terraced houses with the women whose lives had been so tortured and damaged. I have no idea who decided on this arrangement.

I was eighteen. I am sure that I have misremembered much of the story. I loved talking to the women. They had stories, one of them called everyone “me auld flower”, and another greeted every person she met, whether Bishop or Milkman with “Hallo! I'm praying for your conversion!” They spoke about *The Sisters* in hushed tones and with an echo of speaking about the principal. I knew plenty of the nuns too— we all did. Some of those nuns had been involved in the exposing of the whole system of Magdalene laundries, fighting for justice from within the system. Others had been part of the system. Some had been terrors, I'm sure. Others had tried to be kind. Others had said nothing.

One Sunday morning, there was a ring on our front door. One of the older women

was making the 500 yard walk from her house to the chapel (there was a gorgeous chapel on the grounds too). She stopped at our door, and rang the bell. When I answered she asked for a cup of water. I went and got it for her. She drank it, all the while keeping her eyes fixed on me. I remember she told me she was seventy-eight. I've never forgotten her eyes. I wonder when she'd learnt to be so watchful. When she finished, she asked for another glass of water, so I gave her that too. Then she asked for a kiss. I gave her that as well.

I say all of this because I have never read the week's lectionary text without thinking of that woman. If she's alive now, she's well over 100, although I doubt she's alive. Most of those women are dead. And I think of the ways within which a community of young ecumenical charismatic Christians were singing Shine Jesus Shine in a building that had been used to administer such horrors over decades. I think about how much energy I spent praying to Jesus to allow me into heaven, when all the while I was living on a property that had been a living hell for so many girls and young women — and those young women grew into older women — for so long. I don't think I had too much faith; I think I didn't have enough. I was so fixated on the anxieties of charismatic religion that I was not paying attention to the question of justice in the here and now. The older women — the former inmates of those laundries — were not now living in squalid conditions. They were in warm and clean houses with their own rooms. But who cares? They were living reminders of the lives that had been stolen from them. Each of them could have had somewhere of their own to call a home: a flat, a house; grandchildren, neighbours, choice, a bus-pass, pension books and independence. They were living reminders of the long-term impacts of the religious powers that — in the name of God and Ireland and citizenship and whatever else — perpetuated criminal abuse.

Many denominations across the world are facing justice, and for good reasons: reformatory schools, mother and baby homes, and so many others are being brought to the light of justice. "For everyone will be salted with fire" Jesus says in this week's gospel. I think the call is to be the grit and spit of inconvenience in our current structures of power, exposing our own abuses, and considering the calls of justice in the here-and-now. This is the work of response to the gospels. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" Jesus says — be the difficult voice that will not allow convenience to dictate the questions of serious accountability.

Prayer

Difficult Jesus
You were not easy to be around.
You pushed your friends into difficult questions
and you did not back down
from your detractors
in the name of easy camaraderie.
You were salt and fire.
You were sometimes spit in the eye.
Help us speak and ask and question
and confess and name and change.
Because we live in a world made by you,
but also made by us. With
institutions and laundries and
schools and homes that were
anything but safe, that were
anything but warm, that were
anything but good.
Amen.

Further Reading

The book *What Were You Arguing About Along The Way?* is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, the brilliant theologian, scientist and liturgist has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning.

It'll be released from Canterbury Press in late November this year, just in time for Advent!

The ISBN is 978-1-78622-399-9

You'll be able to get it from all good bookshops, or online venues.

If you can order directly from Canterbury Press, or through your local bookshop, we'd be extra pleased!