

Homily 32nd Sunday Ordinary Time

‘Come to me all you who are heavily laden and overburdened and I will give you rest.’

I sat in silent ‘suffering presence’ with a poor widow the other day whose 12-year-old son had committed suicide, I listened as she poured out her soul relating how she had gone, after her son’s death, to a priest to seek solace, comfort and consolation. The priest, she continued, ‘rather unfeeling and bluntly told me he couldn’t say my son was in heaven with God as he knew exactly what he was doing...’ She then went on to tell me, ‘That wound was opened again as I recently listened at Mass to The Church’s sweeping teaching on suicide.

Elijah, in today’s First Reading, also encountered a poor widow and it was through her that God worked, providing him with food for the journey, food which prefigures the Eucharist, ‘The jar of meal was not spent nor the jug of oil emptied.’ This poor widow of Sidon offers God the little she has and in return God in his abundant mercy and generosity provides Elijah, she and her son with plenty. Jesus also uses the example of a poor widow in today’s Gospel to challenge the scribes and Pharisees, ‘Beware of the scribes who walk about in long robes, to be greeted obsequiously in the market squares, to take the front seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets; these are the men who swallow the property of widows, while making a show of lengthy prayers....’ When they complain about her meagre offering to the Temple Treasury, Jesus replies, ‘I tell you solemnly, this poor widow has put more in than all who have contributed to the treasury; for they have all put in money they had over, but she from the little she had has put in everything she possessed, all she had to live on.’

Widows, strangers and orphans enjoyed special privilege in Jewish society at the time of Jesus. As the poorest of the poor, they were particularly deserving of God's and the community’s mercy and compassion. My poor widow, trusting in God's infinite mercy and forgiveness for her son was instead handed a 'snake when she asked for a fish' and instead of compassion, words of condemnation. As I sat in silence listening, I felt her deep pain as she embraced me, her warm tears mingling with mine.

Who knows what ‘dark and lonely place’ those who contemplate ending their life are in? Is ‘this ‘dark and lonely place’ not almost always the result of illness, physical psychological or mental? Furthermore, is the fact that a human being sees ending their life as the only possible option left to them not only their issue but a ‘problem’ of society? Is to judge, in blanket fashion, people who are in such ‘dark and lonely places’, often suffering from depression, anxiety and unimaginable mental and sometimes physical pain not at least insensitive and at worst cruel and lacking in human understanding? Is this stance bereft of compassion and lacking in love. To teach or think unconditionally, that ‘Suicide is a grave offence against God, against neighbour and against self’ is equally sweeping, and lacking in both human and divine wisdom.

Can suicide ever be "...done with full knowledge and deliberate consent? In my informed opinion this is extremely rare. To then, on this predicate, state that suicide, 'is clearly a mortal sin' is to lack insight offered by the human sciences which give us some, yet imperfect, knowledge and understanding of the social, mental and psychological pressures on those trapped in such 'dark and lonely places'? More importantly do such generalisations stigmatise individuals and fly in the face of Jesus of The Gospel.

So WHERE IS Jesus of The Gospel in such a myopic and uninformed position? Where is the loving and compassionate Father of the Parable of The Prodigal Son? Where is the merciful and forgiving God? Yes, I can see The Catechism of The Catholic Church (CCC) and the laws and rules of an institution, but for the life of me, I cannot see Jesus. The irony is that many in The Church, whilst upholding the inherent dignity and sacredness of life in defence of the unborn, elderly, sick, differently-abled and dying condemn some of society's most vulnerable and 'terminally ill' (namely those who consider and/or commit suicide) stating their 'exclusion from Christ's Kingdom and eternal death of hell.' (CCC 1861). Is that really and truly what Jesus would have said to my poor bereaved widow? Is that the answer required of a disciple of Jesus? Is that Jesus', who suffered and died for ALL our sins, final word? Is that the pastoral attitude of Christ who states, 'Come to me all you who are heavily laden and overburdened and I will give you rest?' Is this the Jesus who expects us to 'forgive seventy times seven.'(always). Finally is this the Messiah Isaiah prophesied (Isaiah 42:2) '....a bruised reed he will not break.'?

Other people like this poor widow, good and holy people, who have lost loved ones and close friends to that terrible 'illness', suicide, probably sat in church subjected to (perhaps unwittingly) further pain and suffering inflicted on them by the arguably outdated quoting of Church Teaching. Some disillusioned by lack of compassion, wounded and bruised by a lack of understanding of suicide and deeply hurt by a lack of sensitivity to their painful situations, would have left Mass 'broken' people, as my poor widow.

One might argue that the suicidal and those who commit suicide are some of our modern-day widows, strangers and orphans, deserving at human understanding of the 'dark and lonely place' they are in and justly deserving of Christian compassion and empathy. Did the author of Hebrews not remind us today, 'Christ, offers himself once and for all to take the faults of many on himself,' Are we not all poor sinners desperately in need of God's loving mercy, not men's unmerited and harsh judgement?