

22nd Sunday in Ordinary time. Year A

Exodus 19:1-9

Romans 12: 1-13

Matthew 16:21-28

So what was Peter's problem? After a wonderful Jesus acknowledgement to his 'correct' answer to the 'Who am I' question, Jesus turns on him and says quite rudely 'Get thee behind me Satan!' Why such a sudden turn around?

Well apart from clearly trying to resist the authoritative foresight of Jesus in verse 21 and 22, there's in another clue in the second part of v.23. Jesus suggests there that Peter has earned his rebuke because 'he does not have in mind the things of God'! It sounds to me as if it could be quite important what we fill our minds with! If we don't have Godly things in mind but merely the things of man are we also a stumbling block to the Lord and worthy of that Satanic rebuke.

Let me first remind you of where we are. The last two Sundays we have been looking at the way in which God supports and sustains us on our Christian walk of faith. A path which the Gospel today suggests might be quite demanding. We have drawn parallels with the experience of the Jewish slaves who escaped from Egypt and set out on a perilous and unsupported journey across the Sinai desert. Their experience was that when it came down the wire, God somehow stepped in with a well timed miracle of sustenance that kept them going.

The manna from heaven, whatever that was, sustained their bodies. And you remember we saw how that metaphor has become for the Church the main image of the incarnation of Christ and his presence in the Eucharist that we share today. The bread of life has come down from heaven, is broken for us and as we eat in remembrance of him so his life is absorbed into our own to strengthen us on the journey.

Last week, we touched the rock, hard and hostile, and yet finding within it – a trickle and a torrent of life saving water. Here again the metaphor has echoed down through the ages. The living water offered by Christ, which if we drink will quell our thirst for eternity, becomes the creative, life giving, wild energizing spirit that wells up from within even from within our rock like hearts.

Today the OT narrative suggests there is a third way in which God provides for us as we travel towards him. Let me explain briefly. We have Moses 3 months into the wanderings entering the presence of God, returning to the people, providing a shuttle negotiation around a deal which became known as a 'covenant'. 'If you do what I say then you will be my – treasured possession'. (Jesus of course would want us all to see ourselves as treasured possession in God's eyes!) But look at what is going on here. Moses is teaching the people, he's bringing God's word to them, he's filling their minds with divine guidance. 'We will do what the Lord has said' – they respond – they will not be a stumbling block to the ways of God. 'We will be good!' they say.

Out of that conversation God then offers further support – visual and audible signs of his presence. You can read on of the signs of God, the thunder the lightning, the thick cloud, the trumpet blast – and the sound of God’s voice. And the people have this amazing opportunity of immersing themselves in the ‘things of God’, the good things. And out of that experience they are strengthened and sustained to go a little further on the journey. That which they saw, that which they heard, that which filled their minds had a huge effect on how they chose to move on in their lives.

I’m expressing it like that in order to relate it to a current debate taking place this week in South Africa around the influence of music, specifically hard metal rock music, on our young people and the role it plays in the growing culture of youth violence. It was Monday August 18th when Morne Harmse a matric student from Krugersdorp High School killed a younger student with a Samurai sword. He was wearing a mask that was similar to those worn by Slipknot, a popular American satanic rock band – that purposefully sings of the ugly, darker side of life. When the media discovered that young Morne was a Slipknot fan and spent much of his time listening to their music, the question was obvious. Had his mind been so affected by the message and lyrics of the music that his judgment had been severely compromised and the acting out of the lyrics was a natural response even to the point of taking another human life.

Obviously, as commentators have pointed out, it is too easy to make such a simple connection and conclusion. Rock Music cannot in isolation turn children into murderers overnight and a great many other factors come in to play here, but what I want to say in connection with this morning’s theme is that it is certainly true that whatever it is that we immerse ourselves in does have an effect of our thoughts and patterns of behaviour. While you cannot blame one group of dysfunctional musicians on one continent for the murder of a child in South Africa, you can and must ask questions of the influences on our young people that are so powerfully present in today’s youth culture.

The human psyche, I would suggest, is not as resilient as we would like it to be – it is pliant, impressionable and absorbent of external audio visual stimulus which bombards it on a daily basis. From childhood to the grave our thoughts and behaviors are being moulded by what ever we choose to expose ourselves to - good or bad. I say from childhood, but of course it is a well known fact that Mozart is the best audio stimulus you can give an unborn child. Now we can buy specially prepared sustaining CD’s for the unborn to listen to and Mozart is number one!

So I’m saying lets check out what are some of the constant influences that we are exposed to. Are our minds filled with good things the things of God or are our minds full of the social hype and negativity that surrounds us? Because clearly and mercifully there is a choice here!

Personally, for example, I find the shopping mall environment to be ‘soul destroying’ rather than personally edifying. Its not just the neon radiation that would bother me, but the impact of wall to wall slogans, brands, offers, the voice of materialism shouting for our undivided attention. Fortunately my mall visits are fairly infrequent but I’m a little

concerned when my children simply want to spend more time meeting friends to ‘chill in the mall’!

More serious of course is much of our degraded community environment where crime, drugs, violence, together with a tangible disillusionment and depression, a constant negative energy enters the minds and souls of many of our people. The lack of opportunities, the constant pressure and struggles for survival, the anger and frustration breaking out as we have seen in the recent acts of violence against foreigners.

Other influences?. Of course no one likes to admit that they are soapy junkies! But it surprises me how many seem to know the latest turn of affairs in the Bold and the Beautiful! Let’s be careful – just add up the hours when your mind is high jacked by a false reality, that subtly effects the way you think, that to which you aspire, as well as seriously damaging all powers of imaginative creativity!

The church is very concerned about pornography Again it’s not an occasional sight of naked flesh or even the witnessing of an act of love making that is the problem – it is the obsessive nature of pornographic viewing, which destroys our respect for the opposite sex and severely compromises our ability for healthy mature relationships.

But enough – needless to mention the American movies and violent video games.

The message is simple and it’s beautifully expressed by St. Paul in just one verse of his letter to the Philippians (4:8)

*‘Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure,
whatever is beautiful, whatever is admirable, excellent or praiseworthy – think on
these things!*

Think on these things, surround yourself with these things, immerse yourselves in these things, look for these things. Often there is a choice, a great deal of choice. Be discerning in the Video shop. Be discerning about the newspaper that you buy. Don’t forget the Voice should carry a government health warning!

Enter into the things of God. And here lets give thanks and appreciate the opportunities that the Church gives, the opportunities of faith, here in church or in Church on the Move meetings or in ministry outreach events; times when we are led and encouraged to be in a place, where like the children in the desert, we can hear, see and feel the things of God. By using all our senses we can raise the level of our minds.

Christian ministry itself puts us in the position of Moses, bringing the good things of God to the people of God. This week a number of us met to support Kevin and Norma in their recent bereavement, some of us on Wednesday brought words of encouragement to Neville and Carol and their family and neighbours. Often those carrying our God’s work become the recipient of the blessing themselves through the raising and renewal of their minds. We are blessed by spending time with good thoughts; we are lifted up as we reflect on the things of God amidst the dullness of our times.

Joyce was one who lifted us up – by always bringing words of encouragement and gratitude. Through her generosity of spirit she taught us the meaning the three A's. Remember **affirmation, appreciation and acknowledgement** – the things of God!

The walk of discipleship described in the Gospel is tough. The taking up of the cross , means, amongst other things, standing up against the negative influence of our day. But God today again promises us support on the journey. Not just bread , not just water – but good words, good music, good friends, stimulating conversation, awe inspiring Cape storms, breathtaking sunsets, satisfying work, supportive liaisons, effective and encouraging ministry – so much that is noble good, pure and true.

My prayer today is that we may all fill our minds, our hearts and out time with these things so we can all be lifted up and sustained on the journey ahead.

Fr John Oliver
31st August 2008