

Homily for January 14, 2022

To whom are we conforming?

In the reading from 1 Samuel we find at play a situation that is a perennial challenge. It is something that is particularly acute with teenagers, but can follow us throughout life. It is the power of peer pressure. Today because of the pervasive influence of social media, the lure to conform to everyone else is so strong, – and if you do not conform, can lead to an experience of being excluded. This can be a very powerful force influencing how we see and compare ourselves to others.

This is something that can also play out at a national level as we heard in the reading from 1 Samuel chapter 8. The people wanted to have a king like all of the other nations, someone whom they could see, hear, who would lead them into war and make them feel like they fit in with the other nations around them. They wanted to conform, they didn't want to be different, even though Samuel warned them that their king would lord his authority over them.

At the heart of this struggle is the tension we experience between the material and spiritual realms. Because the material - physical world is much more obvious, it is easy for us to conclude that it is far more important than the spiritual and invisible realm. However the whole of the biblical witness would say it is the other way around. We discover true freedom, not by conforming to the physical and visible world but by conforming to the spiritual and eternal world whose true and eternal king is God.

However in a world like this we find this very hard to do. The comparison game is something that can be so consuming of people's lives that it can result in a kind of paralysis. In the reading from the Gospel we have the story of a man who was literally paralysed. I would like to consider him from the perspective of a person who in comparing themselves to others, always feels they come up short, and will do anything to make themselves feel better. So often this can lead to addictive behaviours that although destructive, like Israel addicted to the desire to have a king, they cannot overcome it on their own.

This is where the four friends are so important. They represent the Church who will carry their friend and lay him before the true king, Jesus Christ. Notice what Jesus does in relating to this man. He integrates both his spiritual and physical need and heals both of them. By forgiving his sins, he restores the man's soul to his right relationship with God. By healing him of his paralysis he brings healing and order to his physical world as well.

It is this integration of the spiritual and the physical that Jesus is always wanting to accomplish in our lives, and he uses the community of the faithful, the Church to help bring this about. When we come to a deepening appreciation that the spiritual and unseen kingdom is influencing our lives we can then grow in walking freely in this world because we are less concerned about comparing and conforming ourselves to others. Rather we are a people who with the psalmist are discovering the meaning and joy that it is ours by "walking in the light of God's countenance and exulting in the name of the Lord".

The word countenance is often translated as “face”, but in Hebrew it can also mean “voice”. So those who are happy are the ones who are listening to the voice of the Lord and not the voice of peers and we can claim His loving and protective care.

For you are the glory of their strength..... For our shield belongs to the Lord, our King to the Holy One of Israel”.

May we come to know the grace of King Jesus ever more deeply so that in the words of our Collect we can live as we pray:

Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart.