

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME [C]

Zechariah 12: 10 - 11; 13: 1

Galatians 3: 26 - 29

Luke 9: 18 - 24

When 'Eubie' Blake, the American jazz pianist and composer, celebrated his 100th. Birthday he said: "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself." Well, today/yesterday is/was only my 60th. Birthday, but I just want to associate myself with Eubie's remarks.

And, along with that legendary American comedian George Burns who also lived to be 100, I'd like to say: "I'm very pleased to be here. Let's face it; at my age I'm very pleased to be anywhere."

Around my Birthday way back in 1968, I came to the decision that I had to become a Catholic, and set out on the path to being received into the Church just before Christmas that year.

1968 was a momentous year on the world stage.

A year when the sort of innocence, and hope of the 1960's was lost forever because of the assassination of two good men who were fighting for the dignity, and freedom of their fellow men. The Reverend Dr Martin Luther King was gunned down on the balcony of his motel room in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4 1968.

And Senator Robert F Kennedy was shot in the kitchen of The Ambassador Hotel, Los Angeles on June 6 1968.

Both of them were flawed human beings in their different ways, but which of us isn't? All of us, if we're honest: "Have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Rm. 3: 23

On August 28 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., Martin Luther King delivered his famous 'I Have A Dream' speech.

Delivered to over 200,000 civil rights supporters, it was the defining moment of the Civil Rights Movement; and it's considered to be one of the greatest speeches in human history.

He said: "I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. (Is. 40: 4 - 5) This is our hope, that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

That speech was shot through with Biblical imagery: with the promise that the Lord God alone is our salvation, and our strength.

So those words, images, and momentous events shaped my teenage years, and ignited my ongoing interest in American history and politics.

And, I suppose, they could have steered me into maybe going into politics to try to change the world.

I thank God I didn't. I thank God He had other plans for me.

Politics may be necessary - some may say a necessary evil - for the well being of our society; but what it can't do is change the human heart, and turn us back to the Lord.

I suppose when I was 18, deep down, I knew that to be true.

I guess that's what - almost subconsciously - drew me to Jesus, and His Church.

As I've grown older - and hopefully wiser - the Lord's shown me that's why He drew me to Him, and then His subsequent call to the Ordained Ministry in His Church.

And you know, the dream Martin Luther King had in 1963 of all humankind joining hands in freedom and singing: "Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" was, in reality, actually made flesh two millennia before in Jesus of Nazareth.

This dream becoming a reality is what Paul is talking about in the reading from the Letter to the Galatians.

He tells us that: "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus." Gal. 3: 26

But it would never have entered Paul's head that you can be a Christian on your own by living outside the Body of Christ, the Church.

In truth, you can't say I'm a Christian, and at the same time say I don't need His Church: I don't need to be part of it.

We need to be grafted into Jesus, the Head of His Body - the Church - to live.

Not because the Church wants to have power over people, but because Jesus left the Church as His gift to us; born from the blood and water flowing from His pierced side as He died on the Cross. See Jn. 19: 34

This fulfilled the words of the Prophet Zechariah: "They will look on the one whom they have pierced. [And] on that day a fountain shall be opened to cleanse them from sin and impurity" Zech. 12: 10 & 13: 1

Israel, to whom he was speaking, were looking for their peace, and security anywhere, and everywhere, other than to God.

The Lord, through Zechariah says, I am the only one who can cleanse you from your sin and impurity; yet you will pierce me through.

You refuse to take to your hearts these words from the Psalm: "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and parched land where there is no water." Ps. 63 (62): 1

Our thirst will only be sated in Jesus because, as He said: "The water that I will give will become in [you] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Jn. 4: 14

And Paul in Galatians explains the 'how' of how our thirst will be sated in Christ, and the source of that fountain to cleanse our sin, and impurity that Zechariah spoke of.

He says: "And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes." Gal. 3: 27

In other words, when we're Baptised we go to the Cross with Him. We go into the tomb with Him. We rise to new life in Him.

Even though we might have been a small baby when we were Baptised; that's what happened to us.

Of course, at that age we can't respond to the promises asked of us, so our Parents and Godparents make the promises in our name.

Children grow up, don't they? They want to become adults, and take on responsibilities for themselves.

But why is it that so often they don't take up for themselves in adulthood those promises, and follow Jesus?

I think the main reason for that is us.

We've lost that sense of wonder, awe, and being full of the joy of the Lord because we haven't come to know Jesus as our best, and most true, and precious friend; and people pick up on that lack in us.

Most of us only keep Jesus in our back pocket to use when we have a crisis, or need something or other in our lives: then we put Him away until the next time.

Although I was Baptised as a baby in the Church of England my Parents didn't bring me up as a Christian, or take me to Church, and I really regret that.

They gave me everything else, but not that most precious gift.

It's usual when one celebrates a Birthday to receive gifts; but I'd like you to receive a gift this evening/ this morning.

A gift from the Lord: friendship with Him.

So that when He asks you at some point on your life's journey, as He most certainly will, if you want to follow Him; then you will be able to say to Him: "Lord, to whom can I go? You have the words of eternal life. I have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Jn. 6: 68 - 69