

Father Greg Morgan's Homily for

The 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Only three....” “There are only three being's worthy of respect”, so avowed the irreligious French poet, Charles Baudelaire. “The Priest, the Warrior, and the Poet.” “Other men”, he writes, “are taxable and exploitable; [they are] made for the stable.” The last three Sunday's, we have Jesus articulate three different parables, and so I have selected three different poets for inspiration.

Baudelaire's remark is certainly the most curious of the three to say the least. Often it has been derided as idealistic and elliptical at best or fatuous and foolish at worst. And I myself should quickly add the caveat that I did not purposefully choose this quotation because I agree with it. In fact, I fervently believe respect is something to be earned. I chose it because I found the underlying sentiment resonate closely with something at the core of today's Gospel.

Baudelaire was no devout Catholic. Yet, he was by no means an atheist of convenience, that is to say, someone who simply chooses atheism to escape the demands of faith. At best, you might say, he was religiously agnostic. That aside, to my mind, he was more of a devout contradiction — try to think of an ‘aristocratic bohemian’, which is a contradiction in terms. On the one hand, he was an outsider, a social rebel, a non-conformist, a man on the peripheries of 19th Century France. Yet, on the other hand, he was someone who dressed elegantly; behaved with social refinement; someone who sat in the bourgeois café's sipping espressos; eating fine food in the best restaurants; and one who wanted to be part of the crowd.

But he says he did all this for one reason alone: ‘to watch’ —And this watching was far more than a passive observance. He wanted to try to identify, with intensity, what is the “treasure” that the “modern” person was seeking. At a time of immense cultural change, he wanted to know what it was that was driving the flux and fluidity of the phenomenon we call “modernity”. But in order to know, you had to sit back and watch; watch in order to discern what was hidden within the cultural “field” of French society? What was being disguised by the smoke of the new industrial Paris?

What lay beneath the glister of modern buildings and technology? What was driving the lifestyle and ambitions of the modern person?

What Baudelaire found – “what he saw” – was indeed no “treasure”; what he found was, indeed, of no “beauty”; for what he found, he says, was a nothingness; an emptiness; a death; a nihilism. Thus, lying beneath the exterior of the new society was an existential battle to hide that “emptiness” in a field of the “ephemeral” — the “fashionable” — the need to always make old things look new.

He himself, as an agnostic, saw “modernity”, therefore, as a field where we sell-out, for whatever reason, on the treasure of eternal happiness. And settle for a false ‘treasure’ — a fake ‘pearl’ — that looks attractive; it looks like the path to joy; but we end up left empty; going away sad.

So, why, then, did Baudelaire’s gaze gravitate to the priest, the warrior, and the poet? Well I think it was this: that intrinsic to the very nature of these three existences – when they are lived with integrity – is the preparedness “TO DIE” — “to ‘sell’ everything” for the sake of an immaterial treasure that gives lasting happiness. The priest dies to the world to acquire the “pearl” of divine truth; the warrior dies to his enemies to protect the “pearl” of freedom; and the poet dies to his critics for the “pearl” that is beauty.

But what Baudelaire failed to recognise was that he had actually encapsulated the vocational calling of every Catholic Christian (for, in a certain sense, we are all called to be priests (laity)/warriors/poets): It is imbedded within the historical core – the genius — of the Catholic faith that we are ready to give everything for the sake of Christ — who is the Truth; whose teaching impart Real Freedom; whose glory inspires an Unchanging, Heavenly Beauty.

All nice words — yes, but the point Our Lord makes is intensely practical: What treasure do we live for? Which field are we prepared to ‘sell’ everything — that is to say, risk our lives — for?

To borrow the question asked by the Lord to King Solomon (1st reading): What would you like to be given? If the Creator of the Universe asks us that question, how would we respond, truly?

King Solomon’s response was truly inspired, and he touched upon something I said last week: He did not ask for riches, long-life-, or the lives of his enemies.

The treasure he asked for was so simple yet more precious than anything else imaginable — a heart that can discern the difference between good and evil! A heart that won't waste time trying to satiate its yearning for God in the endless pursuit of material possessions: a heart that won't compromise on doing the good out of a fear of evil. In short, a Catholic worthy of respect is a person of perfect integrity — someone who has a formed conscience and refuses to compromise its judgments.

Not easy to be a Catholic today — It's a struggle and we have to see it and admit it to be a struggle. Because we are trying to reverse the consumer mentality.

Advertisements tend to cultivate desires; desires which lead us to feel elated (believe this will make us happy); so we work in order to buy; but we ultimately go away sad. Faith, on the other hand, originates from within us; the natural desire for God; but to fulfil that desire necessitates we have to sacrifice something (it costs us personally); and the more it costs us personally; the more we begin to dig deeper and see more coherently – and go away happy!

So we have a choice of the two fields; the choice of two treasures: The material plasticity of the modern world, on the one hand, vs the eternal treasure of grace and mercy the that is transcendent, on the other. Sacrament of confession is so important; grace to choose well.

So let's pray we will be people in the world but not of it. Let's not seek its respect by becoming like it, for, ironically, the world will respect us more when we show our readiness to die for something the material eye cannot see; for a truth that never fades.