

Trinity 14, 2010  
Twente, Nijmegen

Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Philemon 1-21  
Luke 14:25-33

### **Conflicted loyalties?**

Someone, I forget whom, said that ‘most Gilbert & Sullivan plays are about Duty’. G & S don’t always put duty in a good light. In fact, the Pirates of Penzance, mocks, albeit in a sympathetic way, the slavish sense of duty of the Victorian era. ‘The Pirates of Penzance’ subtitle is ‘The Slave of **Duty**’. It follows the lead character Frederic through episodes of conflicting senses of duty to the pirates he grew up with, the civilization he wants to re-join, the girl he loves, and finally, the trump card: the Queen, Victoria herself.

Today’s NT readings hover around an important related subject: Loyalty. G & S might’ve had a harder time producing a light opera mocking loyalty. Loyalty is a far more comprehensive thing, less easily critiqued, than a mere sense of duty. Duty is, after all, a by-product of loyalty

Loyalty is not beyond criticism, though – particularly when it is misplaced. Loyalty to so-called national interest, for instance, drove millions to wage trench warfare against each other in the 2<sup>nd</sup> decade of the last century. Millions died, out of loyalty to their country and out of a sense of duty to their military officers. At times like that, any reasonable person might have ask questions about the virtues of loyalty.

At the dawn of this century, our problem may not be too much loyalty but too little. In the wealthy western world, we live in a consumer’s paradise, where we can easily switch toothpastes, mobile phone companies, political parties, or churches, at the drop of a hat. We are cautiously skeptical before we buy or get involved. We want to be certain we will get what we want and not be fooled. But if we do

commit to something, we’re conditioned to think we can drop it if something newer and better arrives.

A healthy sense of caution may serve us well, but an inability to commit to or be loyal to anything is self-destructive. It may be correct to be a bit skeptical about products we buy or even relationships we might start. But if we become incapable of commitment and loyalty, we will be very lonely and exposed in a harsh world. A by-product of our skeptical buyers approach to life is that we also appear to be less and less open to things spiritual if they don’t work for us the way we want them to. God doesn’t behave as a magic miracle machine in the way advertizers try to convince us their products do. So we shop for something else. I bet Jeremiah might find it ironic that we, who Jeremiah regarded as mere clay in the hands of our maker, the Great Potter, that we should deign to judge the Potter. But there we are, conditioned to see ourselves as consumers of spirituality, rather than creatures of God’s making.

It is challenge of Loyalty that is raised by today’s Gospel and Epistle. Loyalty to God, and God’s ways

I agree with St Augustine that God created us and has built into us a desire to seek Him: we are restless till we find our rest in God. We do get side-tracked along the way. Augustine had a torrid youth, full of sexual escapades. His Confessions debunk the myth that ancient literature is boring!

We were created to seek God, but also, once we do find Him, to love Him and be loyal to Him, especially today. Loyalty to God is fine in principle, but what about when it appears to conflict with loyalty to other important things, like our families. Jesus’ summary of the Law – love God and love one another – doesn’t appear to resolve conflicts in loyalty between the two.

This is most problematic, I suspect, within families or with close

friends. What do we do when love of family or friends seems in conflict with love of God and vice versa? For many believers, this is a very real dilemma. One member of a couple loves belonging to and being involved in the life of the local church and the other wouldn't want to get anywhere near it. Or what about conflicts between what you believe God wants and what a friend or family member believes or does? What about when family demands or activities with friends compromise the time prevent you might spend in prayer or worship? On the other side, what about when you spend so much time with church activities that your family and friends doesn't know you? Surely that is no good, either. Can't be the salt of the earth if you are elsewhere all the time. All very real problems I've seen.

The story of Abraham suggests a rather hard-line, God-first approach: God tells Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac. Abraham obeys, but fortunately at the last moment, God provides a substitute – a ram – to sacrifice instead. But still, Abraham had passed God's loyalty test. Jesus, to a 1<sup>st</sup> C audience, full of Jews devoted to their families, said this: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.' Again: ouch!

I have a lovely family, so can't imagine ever hating them. Perhaps Jesus speaks emphatically, in forceful 1<sup>st</sup> C Rabbinic tone, to challenge us to consider our priorities. Who ultimately does comes first? The way of God, or domestic things and people? Matthew's version puts it more palatably: '10:<sup>37</sup> Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;<sup>38</sup> and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.<sup>39</sup> Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

That version is consistent with Luke, I think. But it points up what I

believe is true: If we are prepared to put God first, we will, in one sense, lose the way of life as we know it. But we will also gain more than we can imagine. We will gain new life and a truer perspective. We may risk complicating our existing relationships, because our following Christ devotedly may challenge others and their ways. But we will gain new friends and family, in the form of fellow believers, struggling alongside us on the path of new life. Moreover, we may find that we also see our old friends and that awkward sibling or aunt or uncle in a whole new, more appreciative way. That, too, is a gift. (Think of Philemon & Onesimus.)

Family and friends are vitally important. More important than our jobs and our hobbies. We need be loyal to our families, and all others we are called to love. But family and friends are not to be our gods. Viewed in a healthy spiritual way, they are gifts from God to challenge and support us, to help us learn about the love of God by practicing it in His world as his Son did. Amen.