

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 22:19-23 / Matthew 16:13-20)
23.08.2020

This Sunday's Gospel brings to mind a very beautiful poem by an Anglican priest, Clive Sansom, The poet leads his readers to enter into the heart and mind of the apostle Peter as he experienced his graced encounter with Jesus at Caesarea Philippi. Sansom depicts Peter sharing his experience with his scribe, the evangelist Mark, instructing him *to set his scroll aside* for a while, so that he might simply *listen* to what the apostle lived that day. The poet puts these words into Peter's mouth: *Oh, Mark, men have their moments. That was mine.*

I dare to say that all men (and women) have their moments. Think of it.

Have there not been special moments of encounter with Christ in our lives – moments that have marked us forever since?

These *touches of God* may have been very clearly spiritual experiences, made in prayer, or they may have been of a more mundane nature.

Maybe *our moment* was the day we encountered our future spouse, or made a life choice for monastic profession or engaged ourselves on the path to ordained ministry in the Church.

Maybe *our moment* was an instant we shared with a person we truly care for – an instant so blessed that it felt like a foretaste of the wonder of eternity.

Maybe *our moment* was the first kiss we exchanged with the love of our life.

Or again, *our moment* may have been when we were listening to a sermon or reading from Scripture... when suddenly, unexpectedly, God's word jumped out of the page at us and spoke to our heart, touching us so deeply that it completely changed the orientation of our life.

Our moment may have been an occasion when someone said something simple quite by chance, but their throw-away remark made such an impact upon us that it totally transformed our existence, changed our outlook and reshaped our whole way of being.

Our moment may have been a time when we were given a spiritual insight or a spiritual intuition that has guided from thence forth

Yes, as Sansom puts it: *All men (and women) have their moments.* What occurs then impacts us so strongly that nothing will ever be quite the same again.

It is so important for us to recall our precious meetings with Christ's love, to keep them fresh in our memories, in order to draw strength from them for the more challenging passages of our lives.

Again and again the Scriptures call upon us to remember. We are to remember the past with thanksgiving so as to look to the future with hope. There is strength to be found in remembering!

Perhaps the graced moments which some of us recall today were afforded to us at high points in our lives, but it may be that the graces that come back to us, as we reflect upon *the touches of God* in our lives are associated with more sombre passages, particularly low-ebb moments, that are part of our story.

God's greatest graces, His brightest light, can be given to us when our lives are at their worst and all appears to be shrouded in darkness.

When we have experienced *the touch of God* in our existence its good taste will stay with us. So much so, we can still savour a grace received years after its experience. All we have to do is to *tune into* that graced moment of the past, in which the divine presence made itself felt in our lives to find ourselves plunged anew into the blessing we received then.

It could be that at our time of graced encounter with the Lord we felt strong – as Peter must have done at Caesarea Philippi, where he may have surprised even himself by confessing Jesus to be *the Christ*. The apostle was surely bolstered by what he heard Jesus say to him in return: *Simon, from now on, you shall be called rock*.

But, it could be that at our graced moment of encounter with the Lord we felt ourselves to be poor and needy, weak and vulnerable, miserable sinners standing before Him. That was clearly how Peter felt at another graced moment in his life: at the time of the miraculous catch of fish he witnessed – a story recorded for us in chapter 5 of Luke's Gospel. We read in that Gospel account how Peter fell to his knees and said to Jesus: *Lord, be gone from me for I am a sinful man*.

It could be that the Lord will have approached us and made His presence felt deep within our hearts, at a time when we were experiencing disappointment – a time when we felt (indeed, we knew) that we had let ourselves down badly, had betrayed the Master; and, as a result, felt humiliated and even covered with shame.

It is important to see that even then, in certain extreme moments of our lives the Lord can come to visit us.

Frequently, the Lord will come to us like a mendicant knocking upon the door of our hearts, humbly begging for our love anew.

Such was the case on the lake shore in that post-resurrection encounter between Jesus and Peter recorded in chapter 21 of John's gospel. There we see Jesus cooking fish over a charcoal fire, preparing breakfast for His disciples. Jesus poses this question thrice to Simon Peter: *Do you love me?* That triple interrogation undoubtedly led Peter to recall his having denied the Lord three times as he stood warming himself beside another charcoal fire. At that moment he had denied ever having anything to do with the Nazarene.

Told at Caesarea Philippi that he was to be called *the rock*, at the time of Jesus' trial Peter had crumbled inside. Some rock! Quite brittle really!

After Sansom's mention of *that moment which was Peter's* and in which he had *heard the phrase he had lived for*, the poet has the apostle share with Mark: *Since then I have betrayed it – doubted, denied. Deserted him. But always those words return... more powerful than before. **For, He saw me, not as I was, but as I might be.***

There is something extraordinarily comforting in Sansom's line: *He saw me, not as I was, but as I might become*. The Lord sees us *as we might yet become*.

I wonder if that is the way we think of God looking upon us. I wonder if this is how we dare to look upon ourselves. Does any of us see our self with Christ's eyes... as we might become?

We are all called to look to the future with hope in God's mercy. St Benedict insists upon this hope in his Rule for Monks.

It is clear that Peter found new hope in his personal experience of God's mercy. In his first epistle he refers to *the living hope given through Christ*. What Peter learned throughout his lifetime, and what he so convincingly shares with us in his first epistle, is that *hope is alive when you live with Christ*. This led the apostle to exclaim in the opening section of his First Letter: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead*.

This is the mystery we celebrate this Sunday and every Sunday: hope in the Risen Lord.
Amen!