



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Advent - Year C

His winnowing fork is in his hand

Readings: Zephaniah 3: 14-18, Is 12: 2-6, Philippians 4: 4-7, Luke 3: 10-18

Language shifts. Meanings change.

Some years ago I was reporting on the proceedings of a House of Commons committee. A particularly bright populist Tory M.P. called Teddy Taylor (Glasgow Cathcart) tried an experiment on the government bench opposite which was loaded down with Bennites (Tony not Hilary – Bolshevik not Blairite).

‘You lot are paying no attention to the arguments’, Taylor began. ‘You are so intellectually lazy that I can get a predictable response out of by just uttering one word.’ ‘Nonsense’, came the corporate reply. ‘Very well then’, Taylor went on, ‘I will say two words to you and we will see.’ He paused. ‘SOUTH AFRICA’, he said. A storm of booing, jeering and catcalling followed.

Taylor, as he went on to point out, had said nothing about South Africa, for or against, nothing about Apartheid, nothing about sport or sanctions – just the words. The words were enough. The culture determines which words are ‘Hooray’ words and which words are ‘Boo’ words.

So it is with the word 'Discrimination'. It has become a 'boo' word because its primary meaning has shifted. It has gone from the wholly positive idea that it is an exercise of good judgement, an ability to tell the difference to a meaning that is associated with prejudice and injustice.

'Discrimination' – right judgement and perception- has been redefined to mean, commonly, 'Discrimination *against*' – that is unrighteous and unreasonable disfavour.

It is a pity because while a Christian rightly rejects the follies and wickedness of pre-judging and behaving unfairly, immorally and illegally, if he loses his ability to rightly discriminate rightly he is lost.

A discriminating purchaser would not buy junk. A discriminating diner would order Beef Wellington not Battered Mars Bar.

So a practising Christian would be a discriminating person – between right and wrong, good and evil, better and worse, truth and lies. He would not sink in the mire of moral relativism where it doesn't matter what is done so long as it doesn't interfere with me.

A Christian would not confuse wickedness with virtue. He could not, for example, assent to the proposition that the wholesale destruction of unborn children is a proper work of national health nor confer on it the dignity of charitable status – an act of love. He would use his godly discrimination to fight against the discrimination *against* the innocent.

So today, when we encounter John the Baptist, we see two strands at work. Here the Gospeller records John's simple moral teaching, both unexceptional and righteous. But he speaks of the One who is to come after him. This One, i.e. Jesus, will come with His winnowing fork in His hand and sort out the wheat from the chaff. The wheat goes into the barn. The chaff goes into the fire. The Harvester discriminates. The useful, the fruitful, He keeps. The rubbish, the empty husks, He burns.

This image will be unfamiliar to most of us. We are, by and large, urbanites and even the country folk would be ancient of days to remember a winnowing fork. It's all mechanical now.

But to the attentive follower of the Baptist it would resonate severally. Firstly it would be normative and familiar harvest practice, time consuming and necessary. But second there is a deeper echo here of Israel's history. For there is a threshing floor where the harvest was winnowed that came to be central to Israel's worship and self-understanding.

The threshing floor was that of Araunah the Jebusite ,on the sacred hilltop that King David purchased (2 Sam. 24). It had once been the site of Abraham's sacrifice at Moriah. That old threshing floor would become the seat of the Temple, the place of the Presence to which Israel's hearts would always turn. The threshing floor would become the place of the judgement on the Day of Atonement. The threshing floor would house the Mercy Seat. The threshing floor would be the place of the Passover sacrifice. It would be the place of the final Passover of God at the Calvary.

The Catholic Church teaches a lot about this final discrimination, the judgement, because she teaches what Jesus tells us. At the end there will

be judgement because God is a God of justice. There is no place for the unholy in the Eternal Presence of the All Holy. So, for those of us who have followed Jesus and sought the Way of Life, there will be winnowing. The fruit will be harvested, the chaff burnt in the fires of the purification which is the Purgatory, the final preparation for Heaven. For those who have rejected the fire of God's love and have scorned His justice, who have disobeyed His Word and neglected the works of mercy, there is only the fire of destruction and eternal loss.

It is why the Gospel of Salvation is such Good News and why the task of Mission is so urgent. It is why we are told to 'Rejoice'. It is joy we must share with all men. We must not discriminate *against* our fellow men by failing to tell them about Jesus.

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