



3rd Sunday in Lent Year A - Moaning Minnies

Readings: Exodus 17: 3-7, Ps 95, Romans 5:1-2,5-8; John 4:5-42

Homily by Fr Robbie Low

‘The people complained against Moses. Why did you bring us out of Egypt?’

In the eighties and nineties I was in charge of a growing parish on the high places overlooking North London. The Church Council was filled with good, hard working people who always put in a shift and were enthusiastic for the Kingdom of God.

In the pews sat a lady, wife of a retired Naval officer, who made it her business to patrol parish activities and point out what was wrong with them. Home made cakes at the parish fete didn’t conform to European safety standards. A charge, for charity, to enter an exhibition was illegal. The Parish Council had someone on it who had been on it for twenty five years. Etc etc

The cakes, I told her, I was prepared to go to prison for.

The charity exhibition yielded several thousand pounds and I knew that she was not a notably generous giver.

The Council member was re-elected every year because of her work rate and commitment and, if the regular complainer wanted to replace her the democratic process was open to her – but she would have to work not just talk. Needless to say she never stood.

I mention her here because she is typical of a mindset that is at odds with the Gospel Way and the Pilgrim journey of Faith. And because, I suspect, there is a little of her in most of us, to wit – the MOANER.

In the Old Testament reading today, we are presented with a whole community of Moaners. The Hebrew slaves, freed from Egypt by a miracle of God, are moaning – AGAIN. They have already disgraced themselves in the Golden Calf apostasy. They have bemoaned their freedom, reminiscing fondly on their time in Egypt,

‘Do you remember the fields of cucumbers, the delicious fish?’ - the caviar and champagne, they might have added as the rigours of the journey made them forget the hideous suffering of slavery and the attempted genocide of their offspring. It was the equivalent of a Jew with a ration book looking back fondly to the generosity of the Nazis in 1938 Berlin.

Moaning is corrosive. It is the antithesis of Thanksgiving.

It is a very bad habit for several reasons

One, because it is causative of collective depression and an unrealistic view of the world.

Two because it has, as a corollary, the implication, often clearly stated, that the current deplorable state is entirely the fault of someone else and that the moaner has had no ‘agency’ in this matter. There is nothing that the moaner could have or should have done to assist the amelioration of the situation. He/she is merely the spectator of events and the victim of their outcomes.

Three - It is corrosive because it is infective. We currently live in a society which has taught itself to be just such a disordered, ungrateful and dependent community. It is, for example, worth noting that those who commentate on the nation’s life receive vastly more reward than those who are actually engaged in trying to improve it and consequently take the blame for any shortcomings.

This is not a plea to be ‘Pollyannas’ – to pretend that all is sweetness and light – to live in a saccharine naivete. But it is a reminder to be realists and not travel on false memories and fuelled by imagined resentments and synthetic anger.

In the eighteenth century the philosopher Voltaire took great delight in demolishing the philosopher Leibniz’s naive hypothesis that -

‘All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds’.

Leibniz postulated that this was the best of all possible worlds.

It was a post- enlightenment innocence (or foolishness) that wrote the inconvenient concept of original sin and fallenness out of the equation and majored on the inevitable ascent of Man.

In his satirical novel, *Candide* or *The Optimist*, Voltaire has his 'hero' encounter a series of tragedies and disasters against which he increasingly struggles to maintain his cheery optimism.

The problem for the heirs of Voltaire is that, while they comprehensively ditch Leibniz, they are heading for a universal cult of existentialism – i.e. 'Yes' we have individual agency but the world is absurd and without purpose. It encourages the notion of personal freedom from societal norms and expectations but inevitably heads down the bleak road of atomization, loneliness, pointlessness and the cult of intellectual or actual suicide.

All three of these options are essentially bankrupt.

Indefatigable optimism is risible.

Despair is personally and communally destructive.

Existentialism wars against the basic historic hard-wired instincts of Man.

For the Christian there is an instant recognition of the dysfunction of all these alternative options. He sees the current reality against the background of the Fall of Man. He recognises that 'All things work together for those who love God' – not that all things are 'for the best in the best of all possible worlds' but that all things may be redeemed in Christ through the incarnation of the divine life in Man. For example.....

The Cross is not 'GOOD' – it is the torturing ikon of all that is worst in the satanic deviation of Man. But we call it 'GOOD FRIDAY' because of the redemptive encounter of these evils with the love of God and the outcome of Christ's sacrifice, which sees sin and death nailed to the Tree. That Tree of death becomes the Tree of Life – the centrepiece of a lost Eden.

The other options, the Pollyannas and the Moaners are also the death of Hope. If this is the best of all possible worlds and we are powerless to affect our destiny then life is bleak indeed and we are simply to accept the worst as the best.

If all is simply absurd and ends in death, in non-existence, then no amount of freedom or 'agency' can lift the depression of recognising the pointlessness of our existence. We become a civilisation of Abelites, unwilling to breed a future. Deprived of purpose or destiny we are reduced to a random collection of molecules that disintegrates into a bag of compost. Thus we acquiesce in the despair of the culture of death.

HOPE is the great and unsung and oft overlooked Virtue that holds FAITH and LOVE together. Without Hope, Faith withers on the vine. Without Hope, Love grows cold, hollows out, reduced at best to empty words and cruel indifference.

Let's be done with moaning then and be filled with thanksgiving and Hope.

Or, as the great Bing Crosby, with a little help from the Andrews Sisters, put it...

You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between

You've got to spread joy up to the maximum
Bring gloom down to the minimum
Have faith or pandemonium
Liable to walk upon the scene

Perhaps we should sing this as our recessionary hymn.....