

22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A (2026)

One of our basest instincts likes to see a person get their comeuppance, especially if they have behaved in a way that is particularly venal, hubristic or rude: our innate sense of natural justice demands a re-set, and we draw satisfaction from their having been taken down a peg or two, and served a side-order of humiliation for good measure. Of course, we don't like it when the shoe is on the other foot, but such is the hypocritical nature of our condition.

Falls from grace are nothing new, and we encounter one such in this morning's Gospel reading: Peter's attempt to shield Jesus from harm might, in other circumstances, be taken as evidence of loyalty and friendship; but, in the context of Jesus' prediction of his Passion, can only be read as a catastrophic failure of perception. Peter, who had just confessed Jesus to be 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' – and got that right – went on to get things spectacularly wrong, as he failed to see Jesus' vocation unfolding in a way that was completely contrary to his own hopes for, and expectations of, the promised Messiah. But Peter's misunderstanding was less about a wilful obstinacy that sought deliberately to thwart God's purposes; rather, it constituted an inability to see that God works through paradox and contradiction in ways that confound our understanding, and witness to the inside-out, upside-down nature of the Kingdom of God. Peter would learn, painfully, bitterly, and through his own suffering and martyrdom, that God's ways are not our ways, and that suffering is as intrinsic to the life of

faith as it is to the human predicament; but, in this moment, as he went from being the rock upon which Christ proclaimed his Church would be built to become a stumbling-block – a scandal, *skandalon* in Greek – in his way, he began that life-long process of learning to see the world through God's eyes, whereby old certainties and preconceptions are shattered, and we are offered a new vision, and a blueprint for living that helps us to grow in empathy towards our fellow human beings in their suffering, and closer to Jesus, whose call to take up our crosses is not only a challenge to embrace suffering as redemptive; but, also, a demand that we live by all the precepts of his Gospel, which include refraining from judgment, being willing to offer mercy, and acting as agents of reconciliation – all of which incur at least some personal cost. In short, the call to take up our cross is as much about forgiving someone who has wronged us, and not judging another for their mistakes or lifestyle, as it is about enduring grief or acute physical pain. The Gospel-programme is total, and it impacts upon every sphere of our lives; and we can only know, and participate in, its transforming power when we learn, like S. Peter, to trust Jesus; that, however often we get things wrong, and however unclear the way ahead might be, we might know that God loves us, and offers us a fresh start, that he doesn't hold the past against us, and that mercy and reconciliation are always near at hand.

I wonder if the other disciples who witnessed Peter's moment as teacher's pet, and his subsequent dressing-down, indulged in a moment of *schadenfreude*,

however startled they were by the vehemence of Jesus' rebuke. What they probably didn't expect, however, was that Peter was immediately given a second chance – he wasn't dismissed, ostracised or humiliated; rather, he was shown mercy, even as Jesus explained the error of his ways.

Contrast Jesus' treatment of Peter with the way in which our society treats high-profile falls from grace: in a world that has forgotten how to forgive, cancellation is total, and redemption is nigh-impossible. The real tragedy of the Jason Arday affair is that, despite what he did wrong through human frailty, it seems that he believed that the possibility of redemption and rehabilitation was so remote that he took his own life in despair. And, whilst mercy without truth can corrupt, so truth without mercy can lead to terrible cruelty; and we, as individuals and a society, need to be more acutely aware of the consequences of our judgments, thirst for entertainment, and desire for retribution; just as all three must be tempered by self-control, compassion, and a self-awareness that acknowledges our own failures and need for forgiveness – there is good and bad in us all.

S. Peter stands as a witness that even the Prince of the Apostles was a sinner, and needed the redemption that only Jesus Christ can offer. Our vocation, as his disciples, is to remind the world that redemption is not only possible but essential; and, through the way we live, to show humanity that there is a better way, by sharing without fear or favour something, in Graham Greene's words, of the 'appalling...strangeness...of the mercy of God'. Amen.