

## 27A SFX 2023

A couple of weeks ago I was standing amongst the vineyards of Burgundy, that produce some of the finest wines in the world. Because each plot of land has been cared for, loved, for generations, since the monks, way back when first started cultivating the vines. And I can understand why the first reading is a love-song, of God for Israel, of God for his world. But if we see the readings today as telling the story of salvation then we realize that we have not treated this world well. God expected justice, but found bloodshed; integrity, but found distress. God sent the prophets, and Israel closed its ears; God sent his Son, his only Son, his beloved Son, and the world threw him out of the vineyard onto the barren hill of Calvary and killed him.

Our readings tell the story of Salvation – of God’s love for the world, God’s patience with the world, and God’s love for the world in sending his Son. But they also tells the story of human ingratitude, of servants who want to be lords, of tenants who want to be masters. It tells the story of divine love and human pride. There is a fierce rebuke to leaders who betrayed God’s trust. It is a bitter parable.

We know we are in a mess. We know we get it wrong. We know we could be beginning to despair at ourselves, part of this fallen world, tainted by our share in the world’s sin, so often blind and intolerant like Israel in the Scriptures. We could be beginning to despair. But we should remember God’s original purpose, read again the Maker’s instructions that we find in the pages of the Old and New Testament. And we should tell the story of God’s patience, the God who went the extra mile in sending his Son, his beloved heir, to lead us and guide us to be a people that produce the fruit of the Kingdom.

St Paul has some simple direct words to us today. *“Don’t worry”* and to be honest it are those simple words that I am taking to heart today. As our Lord says elsewhere in St Matthew Gospel. *“Consider the lilies of the field, they neither work nor spin... Do not worry, but set your hearts on the Kingdom.”*

On Wednesday we celebrate the feast of Pope St John XXIII, that old man who did that most youthful of things, took a deep breath of the Holy Spirit and surprised the world calling the Second Vatican Council. His feast day is the anniversary of the opening.

I love Pope John, Pius XII, before him had been very different. Noble by birth, tall, thin, with a chiselled profile, he looked like an archangel and acted with majesty and grace. John’s peasant family had worked the fields for centuries. He was portly, waddled a bit, and admitted to a lady who remarked on his features that indeed the conclave was *‘not exactly a beauty contest.’* It was said at his election: *‘Handsome he is not, but he has a good man’s face.’* Indeed the people of Rome spontaneously called him *‘il papa buona’* - *‘the good pope.’* People had experienced something beautiful in Pope John: the warmth of a father, the friendliness of a brother, the manner of a true Christian.

Just before the Second Vatican Council, there was a great evening gathering in St Peter’s Square, and Pope John made of the most famous papal speeches – he went to his window and gave his so-called *‘Moonlight speech.’* A speech that was, in the words of Pope Benedict, *“full of poetry and goodness.”* A speech inspired by St Therese. The lesson of his

speech was simple: he made people understand that God cared for them, that the Church was near to them, and that he loved them. No stiff papal pronouncement: *"When you go back home, you will find your children: and give them a hug and say, "This is a hug from the Pope.""* It was his equivalent of saying "Don't worry." I suspect many of you fret and worry too much for your own good, so I want you keep him in mind because he had this great ability not to worry, but trust in the Lord, trust in Divine Providence, which means he believed in the good purposes of God.

When he was made Pope, and was lifted up onto the papal chair, the *sedia gestatoria* for the first time, he immediately thought back to his childhood when he was carried on his father's shoulders: *"Once again I am being carried, carried aloft by my sons. More than seventy years ago I was carried on the shoulders of my father at Ponte San Pietro. The secret of everything is to let oneself be carried by God, and so to carry him to others"* he wrote.

That was his secret. Thanks be to God he was rooted in the love of his family but this allowed him constant reassurance of being carried by God. It is not just that John knew it in his head. He lived it. He allowed himself to be carried through life by his trust in God's loving providence. We are people of hope aren't we? Not just people of faith, but people who trust, are confident in God's purpose.

Often we just trust in ourselves and sink like St Peter in the sea. We get caught up in our own schemes and plans and feel overwhelmed by the pressures and trials of life. But John had this ability to place himself in the hands of God, and embrace with joy each moment given to him, untroubled by the past with no fear of the future.

We get a sense that Pope John face the big things because he embraced the little things. Everything given to him – jobs, encounters, chores even, as gifts. Like St Therese his was a "little way." He remembered what his History Teacher had told him: *"Read little, read well."* What he heard about reading he applied to almost everything: *"little but well."*

You might think calling a Church Council would give him sleepless nights. But he knew it wasn't his Council and that he might not even see it through. *"It is an honour just to begin"* he told his Secretary as he called the Cardinals to Rome in 1962. *"If I die, others will come."* Don't worry. As he did with the Council, so with everything he trusted to Divine Providence and let God take the weight.

When first elected he sometimes would wake at night worried over a difficult decision to be made. Thinking himself still a Cardinal he would say to himself, "I'll talk it over with the Pope." Then he would realise where he was. "But I am the Pope!" he would say to himself. After which he would conclude: "Well then, I'll talk it over with Our Lord!"

One day when privately it had been made known to him that his cancer was terminal he spoke to a group of seminarians in Rome. "Every day is a good day" he said "a good day for living and a good day for dying." This ability of the Pope to call the imminent day of death a good day derived from his lifelong **habit** of calling **every day good** because it was a gift from God. So don't worry, don't fret. "The secret of everything is to let oneself be carried by God, and so to carry him to others."