

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Jan 25th 2016

Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, Apostle

Luke may or may not have intended it, but in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles there is a strong interplay between blindness and light. While Saul had eyesight, he was blinded by misguided zeal, yet it was when externally blinded that he began to see inner light, even “seeing” a vision of a man called Ananias. This interplay offers us some lessons from today’s first reading.

The first lesson is that a well-meaning heart does not preclude blindness. Although objectively wrong in his zeal, there is no question that Saul was following his good intention and this tells us that we need to test our good intentions. As the saying goes, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” This is where discernment plays such an important role in helping us to recognize what comes from the “evil spirit” and what comes from the “good spirit.” Following one’s “good heart” uncritically can lead us to objectively wrong decisions.

Another lesson we can learn from Saul’s experience is that convincing ourselves that we are fighting on God’s side can easily blind us. Historically many of the most cruel confrontations have taken place purportedly in the name of God or of religion. History is full of “religious wars” and we might think that such situations happened back then before “enlightenment”. Yet we are seeing that today, perhaps most blatantly in radical Islamic groups both in the Middle East –ISIS– and in Africa –Boko Haram. For years Northern Ireland was bathed in blood between groups draped in religious banners. We have seen cruel acts of violence between Suni and Shia Moslems and, closer to home, we see an intransigent factionalism in the Church ? of course, all in the name of God. The “gimmick” of convincing ourselves that we are fighting on God’s side is not just a thing of the past.

In the gospel of John, Jesus warned his disciples that a time would come when anyone killing you will think that he is doing a holy service to God [16: 2]. It is not that far back that six Jesuits and two co-worker women were murdered in cold blood in El Salvador. The two women were in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the murder of the six Jesuits was a premeditated decision made by the military. Fr. Jon Sobrino, S.J., who accidentally escaped the massacre by being out of the country, tells us in his book, *Companions of Jesus*, that the meeting of the military, at which the killing of the Jesuits was decided, was closed with the Our Father. Jesus was right.

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