

Homily St. Ignatius – 31 July 2022 – Ben Frie SJ

Turbulent times, uncertainty, war. We feel threats, problems that are growing over our heads. Young people are looking for something to hold on to, because their lives have become very complicated with unequal choices and decisions whose consequences are impossible to oversee. What will happen to faith and religion, what are we living for, what can we still afford? Many are worried.

This sense of the times is very similar to that of the late Middle Ages. A new age is dawning, unexpected opportunities are opening up. The world's oceans are sailed, Columbus discovers America. International trade emerges on a global scale. People are turned into slaves and commodities. Church life is compromised, damaged by an outdated morality. Leaders are sought to show the way in a new world. Whom shall we trust anymore? Great minds come to mind: John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli. The Inquisition had to work hard to keep church doctrine pure. Among the eye-catchers in those years is also Ignatius of Loyola, a Basque nobleman who in his person marks the transition from the old to the new era.

He was of nobility, well-to-do, skillful with money, with weapons, with women. Making a good impression was his daily work. He was not afraid to take risks. It all came to pass when he was hit by a cannonball during the siege of the fortress of Pamplona. His leg is badly injured and he has to stay in bed for months. That was the end of his courtly career but at the same time the beginning of a very different life.

Iñigo - that was his original name - falls into an unprecedented mental crisis. All his values and norms go into revision: he is torn from everything to which he was immensely attached. Everything that was self-evident loses its meaning and his life seems to become meaningless. Iñigo becomes a penniless, distraught spirit who ends up in a spiritual desert where, at the end of his days, he gets temptations to take his own life.

Just where he torments himself with merciless punishments for failing to be perfect, the realization comes to him that he is capable of nothing without a God who is more merciful to him than he is to himself. That becomes his salvation: he admits God into himself.

Thus begins a long school of learning: the growth into spiritual, into inner freedom. He will always retain something of a scrupulant, but it makes him an authentic living human being, who allows himself to be talked into nothing and who argues with everything and everyone - including himself - in order to arrive at truth, deeply felt and experienced as irrefutable. The word is close to you, in your mouth and in your heart.

Jesus becomes his great guide and conductor, his seal of approval. Nothing he loves more than what Jesus did: being there for God. Living for God. Your happiness lies in God, Ignatius learns, not in yourself. Consistently, in the decisions he has to make, he looks for how God appears in his considerations. Doing that, becomes his motto, which connects you most with God. 'I strive fervently to grasp it, grasped as I am by Jesus Christ.'

His organizational talent gives him the tools to structure the search for God: look closely, he says, at what moves you in your prayer, what moves you and why. You carry the compass for your life's structure within yourself: you can begin to experience God as a companion by looking closely at your inner life. Sorting out, is his motto, get a picture of what alienates you from God and what makes you more familiar with God. Listen to Jesus: "If anyone loves Me, he will take My word to heart. My Father and I will dwell with him." In intimate contact, the Spirit of God will make you understand everything.

The close relationship that can grow with God by always looking at Jesus in this way and living in his spirit leads to mysticism: Ignatius writes exercises for all who seek it with ingenious guidelines to see pitfalls and unmask any form of self-conceit. One speaks here of a mysticism of action: Ignatius wants you to draw consequences from your religious experiences, and from your encounters with God. Your prayer should become concrete in the choices you make.

Thus we are called to our faith and to our ability to entrust our lives to God, to really allow God into us. Love plays the leading role in this story: that is what it was all about.