

TRUE AND FALSE RELIGION: 4TH SUNDAY C

Every now and then a family decides to leave the hustle and bustle of the big city and move to a small town or village in the country. City life has become too busy, too chaotic, too demanding and too impersonal. They go to some place where, they claim, people know one another and care about one another. They are looking for meaning, acceptance and belonging.

What such city people are looking for among country people generally happens, and especially in times of crisis, e.g. when someone's hurt in an accident, somebody loses a loved one from a sudden heart attack, someone's house burns down or is washed away in a flood. Such events bring out the best in neighbours. They arrive with kind words, hugs and kisses, and any number of casseroles to tide the family over till they can get back on their feet.

But there can be a down side to everyone knowing everybody else. Some people may become the target of suspicious, gossiping, mean and nasty neighbours. This is certainly what happens to Jesus when he comes back to his own people at Nazareth. At first they welcome him as the local boy made good, the town hero. They are full of praise for what they have heard about him - his good and kind deeds, and his powerful and challenging message.

But one influential group in the town becomes particularly jealous, angry and annoyed with him, the more they hear about him. He's become too big for his boots, they say, too high and mighty. They begin to sneer: Who does he think he is? No better than anyone else, surely! Just the son of that carpenter, Joseph, that's what! As ordinary as everybody else around here!

They, and more and more others like them, decide that if he has anything to offer, they, the people of his own home town, should be the first to benefit. Without showing any real faith in him as God's agent and spokesperson, they begin to demand that he do in Nazareth some of the wonderful things he is said to have been doing elsewhere.

But Jesus says back to them the plain truth, the truth they need for their own good. In the community and kingdom of God that is his mission there is no room for privilege. What matters most is to have faith, and along with faith, trust and love. God's love and help begin wherever there is human need for it, as with the starving widow of Zarephath, and with Naaman, covered with

leprosy. Both were Gentiles, non-Jews. But they were persons in need, and therefore loved by God like any Jewish person.

At this message of the indiscriminate love of God, the people of his home town are outraged. They turn on Jesus. They throw him out of the synagogue and even try to finish him off by tossing him over a cliff.

Jesus at Nazareth was experiencing the fate of all prophets. But prophecy, being a spokesperson for God, is not about pleasing people. It's about speaking the truth, sometimes the truth that no one wants to hear, the truth that often gets covered up, and yet the truth that one must hear and heed for one's own good.

But why did the locals turn on him with such fury? The first reason was because of what he said. But there was a deeper reason. It was because he showed up the ugly parts of their personalities. After all, if you stir up a stagnant pool a lot of mud comes to the surface.

Sad to say, religion can become misunderstood, twisted and distorted. When that happens, it tends to bring out the worst in people. They become narrow and bigoted, feisty and fanatical, mean and nasty, hateful and hurtful, even to the point of wanting to kill anyone who dares to disagree with them.

True religion, however, and especially that of following Jesus, brings out the best in people. It liberates and humanizes them. It makes them friendlier, more accepting and more forgiving persons. It fosters harmonious relationships and builds community. When this happens, religion is something beautiful.

In true religion there is an essential link between faith and love – doing things for others because of what we believe. St Paul has said '*there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love*' [Second Reading]. What's the use in having both faith and hope if we are lacking in love?

So the question each of us must ask, and ask here and now is this: What does religion bring out in me? Is it really and truly making me a better person?

bgleesoncp@gmail.com