

26 December 2020

Writings: Opinions

Some of those who belonged to the Synagogue of the Freedmen...stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke (Acts 6:9-10).

I learned early in life that people have different opinions on most subjects. Whenever I encountered someone whose view on a topic was different from mine I would listen to what they had to say and then try to explain why I disagreed with them. Some times the other person would point out a mistake in the information or logic upon which I based my opinion and I would alter it. I learned from the experience and thanked them. On other occasions I would convince he or she that my view was correct. There were also times when I was sure I was right but recognized we would have to agree to disagree. Yet, on a few occasions the other person was so convinced he or she was right the discussion got very heated and I tried to drop the subject.

In today's First Reading, a debate between Stephen and some members of a Synagogue becomes so heated that it leads to the Deacon's death. It highlights the danger of encountering people who are so convinced they are right, they will allow no alternative views.

During his mission on earth Jesus encountered many people who argued with him about his teachings. His death on the cross was the ultimate rejection of his claims to be the Son of Man. When Stephen preached the Gospel message, he likely knew he would encounter the same resistance. Yet, his knowledge of the truth about Jesus would not allow him to remain silent. When objections were raised against his understanding of Christ's identity and mission he answered them in a convincing manner. His effectiveness in doing so enraged the Synagogue members to the point where they had to kill the messenger. But they couldn't kill the message.

Once again we find ourselves in a lockdown. Yet, there are differences this time. Medical personnel (doctors, nurses, researchers) know a lot more about Covid 19 than they did in the spring. They know so much they have vaccines that appear to be safe and effective. They have a better understanding of how measures such as social distancing, wearing a mask and frequently washing your hands can slow the spread of the virus. Another difference is how many people are resisting these measures. There are those who publicly resist the restrictions because they infringe on their freedom. There are those who argue these rules cause too much damage to the economy. There are those who understand the rules and reasons behind them but whose actions simply ignore them. A third difference is how many people seem to be unable to have a civil conversation about these measures. Families, workplaces and parishes have become so divided about how to respond to the pandemic their members have stopped talking to each other. The polarization which has infected our politics has now spread to our common desire to say healthy.

The challenge for Catholics and other people of faith is how to navigate in these waters. One essential thing is for them to listen carefully and think critically about the information they receive. When I was at university I was often told to "consider the source" when listening to or reading someone. Is the source's motive to convey the truth or manipulate your thoughts or feelings? Another important thing when listening to people is to focus not just on the information or opinions they convey but their feelings. Many people are fearful or anxious during this crisis and so may not be thinking things through clearly. Recognizing these feelings is a sign of respect that all people deserve regardless of their views. A third crucial thing is to recognize and defend the truth. When reliable sources present reasonable recommendations backed up with evidence they should be trusted. Truth is not something determined by how many individuals believe it, whether it is trending on social media or how often a political leader repeats it. It depends upon whether it is true.

Stephen failed to convince the members of the Synagogue of the truth about Jesus. But it didn't stop it from being true.