

12th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR, A, 2020

The message in the last couple of verses of today's Gospel could not be any clearer: it is a categorical statement by the Lord that if we are loyal to Him, He will be loyal to us in offering us the gift of eternal bliss; if we are disloyal to Him, He will disown us before the gates of paradise.

Wow! No pressure there, then!

So, why? Why is the Lord so forthright and absolute in his demand for loyalty? Well, partly because any genuine, life-giving friendship is, of its very nature, based on loyalty and trust. Only if you really trust someone will they be one of your closest of friends. Indeed, most people only ever have a few, closest friends. Many of us will have a best friend from among that small group.

We can see how important that loyalty and trust is when, for whatever reason, the friendship goes awry. The effects of a broken friendship can radiate outwards with a devastation which is as rapid and cruel as a nuclear explosion. It can be awful to behold, and even more awful to experience: the seething sense of betrayal and the righteous anger that demands justice can be overwhelming and defies all logical explanation. If you have ever experienced a broken friendship that has been dear to you, you will know what I mean. No amount of time spent mulling over the events gives an explanation or 'closure', as the psychologists would say. Why? Because it is fundamentally an irrational act; we can't give reason to something that is unreasonable.

What Jesus is saying to us is that the relationship with Him ought to be that of the deepest of friendships. In fact, it is based on a loyalty and trust that is even more important than all other friendships because he is Divine. He commands absolute loyalty and trust from us, yes, because that is what friendship is based on anyway, but also because his friendship is utterly faithful and trustworthy. He will only deny that friendship before the Father if we through our lives deny him without remorse.

How hurt and devastated the Lord must have been then when He was betrayed by one of his own! How crushed and broken He must have felt when Judas handed him over to be condemned to death by a kiss – the very sign of friendship – for a mere sum of money! The suffering of Jeremiah in the first reading really was a prefiguring of the Lord's suffering when he said: *"I hear so many disparaging me, terror from every side! Denounce him! Let us denounce him! All those who used to be my friends watched from my downfall"*

But the truth is that all the anguish the Lord experienced was not just because of Judas' betrayal. It was because of our betrayal too. Every time we betray the Lord through our sins and denial of his teaching we add to his anguish and suffering.

However, the Lord knows we are weak; He knows that it sometimes takes great courage to witness to His friendship, to remain true to him. That is why He commands his followers to not be afraid – three times within two paragraphs. For

sometimes we betray the Lord in our own lives, not because we do not love the Lord, but because we fear more what people will think of us. We all have a deep yearning to be loved and accepted by those around us - be it our family, our friends, or our work-colleagues. We want to fit in and be part of the crowd. We should never underestimate our own insecurities and the insecurities of others as a driving force behind our actions.

Our Lord's reminder to us is that no matter what people say of us, our friendship with Him is the most precious thing in his eyes; and at the end of time all things shall be revealed. All the secret intentions of our hearts and of other people's hearts will be laid bare.

So, it is worth remembering that when you come to Mass on Sundays (in normal times); when you say your prayers perhaps together as a family; when you are unabashed at telling people you are a Catholic and that you believe in the Catholic faith; you are being faithful to that personal friendship with the Lord and He will reward you. He will declare himself for you in the presence of his Father in heaven.

And if we need any example to follow, there is probably no one better for the modern world than St Thomas More, whose feast day it will be tomorrow. He did all he could to be a good and upright citizen and a good political leader, but he would not sacrifice his personal friendship with the Lord for his own political career and his own insecurities of being loved by those in power. Instead, he paid for it with his life. As he was put to death, he declared that, "I die the king's good servant, but God's first". Let us all remember to put our friendship with the Lord first in our lives.