

“Renounce” - Thursday after Ash Wednesday

At seminary, our start of year 5-day retreat would alternate between a preached retreat and a guided one. One of the guided retreats began with our spiritual guides introducing themselves. The first was a priest who said that these five days were an opportunity to search for God. The person after him to introduce herself was Sr Gemma Simmonds and I have never forgotten her words. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘that’s all fine but, of course, what really matters is that God has already found us.’

Perhaps, we often feel that our prayers do not take flight and God seems distant but that’s OK because the Son of God came from Heaven to find us and the words he speaks in today’s Gospel, even allowing for the fact that he took on our human frailty, come directly from His communion with his Father for they occur near the end of a conversation between Jesus and the Apostles, which Luke tells us, began after Jesus had been ‘praying’ (9:18). And what does Jesus learn from his Father that we are to be taught: ‘If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself’ (9:23).

But the next time the ‘r’ word is used, it will be Jesus who is being renounced, for the Greek can also be translated as ‘deny’ and it is used to describe Peter’s behaviour in Jerusalem: three times he denied Jesus, renounced him. ‘And Peter went outside and wept bitterly’ (22:62). When I cry over my sins or am maddened by them, I do so mostly because I know that by denying God, I have lost myself - I become less me and am maddened by the me that is left.

So ‘renounce’ yourself Jesus says, and he should know that this is what is necessary because he speaks out of communion with His Father, in whose image and likeness we are made. We renounce ourselves - we say ‘No’ to whatever falls short of God’s glory - because as we are made in His image and likeness, to fall short of God’s glory is to fall short of our own. I have been looking forward to Lent this year because, by God’s grace, I do want to become like myself, like God. It is awfully hard to renounce ourselves but, gosh, it does make life worth living.