

Feast of St. Ignatius, 2017

Homily by Peter McVerry SJ

Well, I, for one, thank God for St. Ignatius; if St. Ignatius hadn't founded the Jesuits, I would have had to go out and look for a proper job.

St. Ignatius' life was a life of two halves, and of two dreams. In the first half of his life, Ignatius was a soldier who dreamed of the fame, riches and glory that would come to him as a brave and heroic warrior. He lived for wine, women and song and could well be considered as a patron saint of those with an addiction, as he had a terrible gambling problem.

Then came the famous cannonball. That cannonball, not only shattered Ignatius' leg, but it also shattered all his worldly dreams. The God, who abhors killing and weapons of war, used a weapon of war to achieve God's purpose, namely to turn Ignatius' life around, from facing the enemy to facing God.

While recovering in hospital from his shattered leg, Ignatius read the lives of the saints and dreamt that if he could no longer be the finest warrior that ever lived, he would become the finest saint that ever lived.

He set out for Barcelona, met a beggar on the way and gave him all the fine clothes that a rich man like Ignatius was wearing and swapped them for a garment made of sackcloth. The poor beggar got arrested and thrown into jail as the police presumed he must have robbed some noble person. Ignatius stopped off at Manresa for a few days. The few days became ten months and during that time, he spent seven hours a day in prayer, worked in the local hostel for sick homeless people, and begged for his food – this should not be tried at home, unless you are a saint. During that time, he wrote his famous Spiritual Exercises which has helped millions of people to deepen their relationship with God.

If we tried to sum up the life of St. Ignatius, it might be that he had an intense relationship to God, so much so that he was considered suspect by the Vatican (always a bonus on your CV) and thrown into prison several times by the Inquisition. The risen Jesus was his closest companion, his friend, mentor and guide. He wanted all Jesuits to have the same familiarity and closeness to Jesus as he had, and so be called “Companions of Jesus.”

Before his conversion, Ignatius was a man of the world. After his conversion, he remained a man of the world, but in a different sense. Ignatius did not want Jesuits to live an enclosed, monastic life; he wanted them out in the world. They were to be men of action, but action that flowed from their personal relationship with Jesus. They were to be “contemplatives in action.”

And what did Ignatius want Jesuits to do? Ignatius wanted us, as companions of Jesus, to continue the work that Jesus began.

In the Spiritual Exercises, there is a key meditation on the Incarnation of Jesus. Ignatius asks us to imagine the Three Divine Persons looking down at our world. And what do they see? They see today, as in the time of Ignatius, so much suffering, so much hunger, so many lonely people, so many people suffering from war. Today we would have to add, 25 million refugees, 25 million people living on the brink of starvation, 1 billion people going to bed hungry every night, countless people living on the streets in every city of our world. When God created the human race, this is not how God wanted the human race to live.

So the Three Divine Persons decided to send Jesus down to earth. Jesus tells us himself what his mission is. In the Our Father, the prayer which he asked his followers to say, he gives us his mission statement and asks us to pray that his mission might be accomplished. We pray “thy kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.”

Jesus came to share with us God’s dream for our world, the dream that we, the children of God, the whole human race, would live together as a family, the family of God. Jesus’ dream was of a world where no-one would be hungry and not be given something to eat, where no-one would be thirsty and not be given something to drink, where no-one would be naked and not be given something to wear, where no-one would be sick and not have someone to visit them, where no-one would be in prison and be rejected by their community (Matt 25). Jesus’ dream was of a world where every child of God could live a happy and fulfilled life. As companions of Jesus, we share his dream of building a world of justice and peace and thereby making the kingdom of God a reality here on earth.

But Jesus did not come just to share with us God’s dream for our world. Jesus showed us how that dream would become reality. By his death on the cross, Jesus sacrificed everything for us, everything he had and everything he was. To build the kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and peace, involves sacrifice, a radical caring and sharing with those in need, and a reaching out to, and welcoming, those who are rejected and marginalised in our world. Ignatius wanted the Jesuits to follow Jesus by becoming “men for others,” (and maybe in the future women for others, who knows!) people who would be

prepared to sacrifice everything they have and everything they are, as Jesus did, for the sake of others. Ignatius wanted us to live Jesus' dream, and to make his dream come true.

The best-known Jesuit today is, of course, Pope Francis. He is going to those who are suffering, those on the margins, refugees, homeless people, prisoners, as Jesus himself did. In all he says and does, he is challenging us to reach out to those in greatest need and put them at the centre of our lives, as Jesus did. He continues to reveal the God of compassion whom Jesus revealed in his own life and teaching. Pope Francis challenges us all, and especially us Jesuits, to live the commitment we have made to follow Jesus, in giving our lives "for the greater glory of God."