

LIFE AND WELL-BEING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

15TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

On losing control

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Amos 7: 12-15; Ps 85:9-14; Eph 1: 3-14; Mk 6: 7-13

In *Losing Control. Global Security in the 21st Century* (2000), Paul Rogers, a Peace Studies professor at Bradford University, highlights the increasing disparities and unsustainability as a risk to global security. Drawing on events in recent history prior to the 2001 World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks, he had, in a way, predicted that the fight against terrorism would ultimately lead to devastating wars. He urged for a reassessment of Western security paradigms. In 2002, he revisited *Losing Control* by examining the spread of weapons of mass destruction, including biological warfare, ecological crisis, hypercapitalism, and the rise of poverty.

In 2010, economist Stephen D. King published *Losing Control. Addressing the challenges to Western Prosperity*. He highlighted the ongoing struggle of the West to sustain economic stability, particularly due to issues such as money laundering, real-estate speculation, and high-risk financial services. King predicted that Western consumers would no

longer be able to maintain a lifestyle beyond their actual financial resources, leading to heightened instability and inequality.

Both authors emphasise that despite feeling secure, we are actually experiencing a loss of control and security. The increasing discontent among people is a sign of this loss. Populist politics exploits this sentiment in a dangerous and irresponsible manner, generally by pointing to potential scapegoats. Without a serious commitment to radical changes in political and economic practices, the outcomes could be catastrophic.

Today's liturgy readings address the topic of relinquishing control and seeking security, but through the lens of faith, confidence and selflessness. While in the realm of earthly powers, self-protection is seen as a remedy for lack of control and security, in the framework of God's reign, surrendering security and control is viewed as a prophetic and constructive embrace for the common good.

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis condemns the worldly paradigm creating unsustainable inequality "imbalances" in "a worldwide crisis" in terms of the return of "the worship of the ancient calf", "a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money", "the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose", and "lack of real concern for human beings". One might argue that true and transformative change lies within the control of politicians and superpowers, but it's important for all of us to

remain vigilant in distancing ourselves from the conventional beliefs that will eventually collapse and consume us. In truth, we each possess a degree of influence – however relative it may be – over our way of living, the decisions we make, especially in the social and political realms, the values we uphold, and the reasoning that guides our lives.

Amos departs from his secure occupation as "a shepherd and dresser of sycamores" in response to the divine call to prophesy to God's people, denounce injustice and forewarn of the impending exile. Dismissed as a misguided "visionary", he is prohibited from prophesying in Bethel by Amaziah, the idolatrous priest, who aligns himself with the king reigning over the sanctuary on the sacred ground where God revealed himself to Abraham and Jacob. There, Jeroboam erected a golden calf for worship, and even ordaining priests, essentially usurping God's House.

In the Gospel, "Jesus summoned the twelve", sending them out to the people, armed only with God's Word and the assurance based on their trust in the Lord. Their mission is to preach repentance, namely to truly acknowledge the misguided path one is following towards their own destruction, and to make a change before it's too late. For Christians, repentance entails accepting salvation through Jesus Christ, "forgiveness of sins", in a wise and insightful life leading to lasting fulfillment.

Better than life

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We are in the heart of summer. We have had to quickly adapt to this yearly surge of heat, and while we enjoy the long summer days and the time spent outdoors with family and friends, we cannot but become aware that this hostile heat is a reminder that fundamentally we are persons moved by thirst.

Like a dry and parched land, so is the human heart constantly thirsting for something more. While we speak of having the need for water, food and the other basic elements for survival, we use the term desire when the thing we lack somehow remains elusive, never really achieved. We might get a glimpse of what we desire, but never a sharp image of it. Like the horizon, it is always ahead of us.

Psalm 63 is the psalm of desire par excellence. Like most

psalms, it is attributed to David while he wanders in the desert, the place which more than any other brings human beings in direct contact with their innermost desires.

In the desert, he remembers that glimpse he got of the Lord while he was in the sanctuary. Hundreds of miles away from that sanctuary, he now finds himself in a place where his desire is ignited.

Further on in the psalmody, Psalm 107 identifies four categories of people whose desire is completely engaged. There are those who wander in the desert wastelands, helplessly looking for a city to settle in. Next are the merchants who sail the mighty waters yearning for a harbour that provides them shelter. Then, there are those who take the route of rebellion and protest, seeking to carve a path of their own, getting tired of fighting and desiring a new start. Finally, there are those who imprison themselves in the chains of their sorrows, waiting for somebody to give them a taste of freedom.

As much as the psalms explore without fear or prejudice the

Loyal, enduring and steadfast love answers our deepest desires.
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deepest crevices of the human heart, they also explore with equal conviction a deeper response that comes to meet human desire right where it finds itself, whether it is lost in the desert, fighting the waves or trying to rise above its gloominess.

For the psalmist, there is an answer to our deepest desires. It is called *hesed*. This short and weirdly-sounding word can be translated as a loyal, enduring and steadfast love. In whichever way it is translated, human beings cannot create it for themselves. It has to be shown to them by he who planted that very desire in the first place.

Daringly enough, the psalms make a very provocative statement. This *hesed* love is prefer-

able to life itself, not because life has no inherent value, but because without a taste of *hesed* that corresponds to our deepest desires, life would lose much of its flavour.

Without a proper response to our deepest desires, we either manufacture surrogate responses, or more seriously, stop carrying that tension in our hearts out of discouragement and a general state of bitterness. Those who make a concrete experience of *hesed* will, despite or rather because of their desires, arrive at gratitude and a spirit of praise, because somebody listened and responded when nobody and nothing else could.

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QUOTES & NEWS

Pope Francis visited Trieste last Sunday for the conclusion of 50th Italian Catholic Social Week. Extracts from his speech and homily follow:

Indignant not scandalised

God is found precisely "in the dark corners of our lives and of our cities", and among "the least, the forgotten, the discarded".

"Let us not be scandalised by Jesus; but, on the contrary, let us be indignant at all those situations where life is degraded, wounded, and killed," the pope pleaded. "Let us bring the prophecy of the Gospel into our flesh, by our choices even before our words."

In a special appeal to the Church in Trieste, Pope Francis called on the faithful: "Strive ahead! Continue to be on the front line to spread the Gospel of hope, especially towards those arriving from the Balkan route and towards all those who, in body or spirit, need to be encouraged and comforted."

No one must feel useless

"Everyone must feel part of a community project; no one must feel useless.... Certain forms of welfare that do not recognise the dignity of the person" are not acceptable, Pope Francis said, adding the disregard for human dignity "is the enemy of democracy, is the enemy of love of neighbour".

"Certain forms of welfare that do not recognise the dignity of people are social hypocrisy. Let's not forget this. And what is behind this distancing from social reality? There is indifference, and indifference is a cancer of democracy, a non-participation."

No private faith

"As Catholics we cannot be satisfied with a marginal or private faith. This means not so much to be heard, but above all to have the courage to make proposals for justice and peace in the public debate."

"We have something to say, but not to defend privileges. This is political love, a form of charity that allows politics to live up to its responsibilities and get out of polarisations and get out of polarisations that impoverish and do not help understand and address the challenges."

(Compiled by Fr Joe Borg)