

A REFLECTION ON THE FIRST READING FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT - Baruch 5: 1-9

I love the French phrase: *Chacun à son goût* - each to his own taste. Sometimes 'goût' is omitted so that it translates to – each to his own. Nowhere is this phrase truer than in the case of my good friend, Adrian; and his predilection for cold water swimming. I have never been more grateful for my heart condition as I say, hand on heart, I'm not allowed to join you. We're not talking of a dash into the sea followed by an even faster dash to dry land. No! We're talking 'heavy metal' cold water swimming. Each week he heads off to Sweethope Lough for a 50-minute swim involving five laps of a designated course in water that seems to have difficulty getting above 5°C. He assures me that it's lovely just being in the water, admiring the trees and countryside around. There are no changing rooms, though there is a sort of shed for those 'ladies' mad enough to join in this exercise. So, he invested in a somewhat voluminous 'Red Original', a full-length fleece lined coat which affords him some frostbite protection as he changes from swimwear into more normal clothing. It's a serious piece of kit with a TOG rating that is off the scale and helps his body eventually return to a more normal temperature. As well as providing a perfect excuse for not joining him in the ice-cold water, my cardiac condition involves regular doses of blood-thinning medication to keep my condition stable. It means I am always cold – so I have taken to borrowing his 'Red Original' and swanning around the house in cosy warmth without having to turn on the heating too soon. It's amazing how being warm and secure lifts the spirit. I'm in a win-win state – no swimming and staying warm. The prophet Baruch would be impressed by my garb. *Wrap the cloak of the integrity of God around you.*

I rarely listen to music on the radio these days, opting instead for a diet of BBC Radio 4 and LBC. I love the regular phone-ins on LBC. It means that I can retain a foothold with the mood of people, their fears and hopes, prejudices and misconceptions. Two calls caught my attention this week – one was from a Salvation Army Captain speaking of the pressures facing the Salvation Army this year. Their income stream is declining, calls on their service growing. He told of an elderly man who will be joining them for Christmas Day because 'his family couldn't afford to have him this year'. Another was during a discussion on palliative care. The lady caller told of her own mother's final few weeks. Medication had been drastically reduced – mainly because her mother no longer needed so much. Her morphine had been stopped. As is the case with some who have a terminal cancer, the pains disappear almost completely. There was not a hint of dementia present. The daughter regularly heard her mother 'chatting away' in her bedroom. 'Who were you talking to?' Calm as anything, her mother replied: 'I was just talking to your dad. He's here quite often now, he's just waiting for me.' She could see that her mother was calm and accepting, peaceful, without a hint of any fear. The daughter wanted to share her story so that others might be comforted by her experience.

Two individuals who I will never meet – but who were willing to share something of their lives – not for fame or material gain. They were merely willing to share something of themselves, something of their integrity. Integrity is like that. It's not a personal possession, it's a gif to be shared. Our integrity is part of our character, it's part of who we are. Above all else we are witnesses. God doesn't ask much of us. He merely wants followers who are generous of heart, willing to share their own integrity. That's the thing about integrity. It is to be shared, not hidden away. So, Baruch urge us to *"take off our dress of sorrow and distress, put on the beauty of the glory of God for ever, wrap the cloak of the integrity of God around you."* Once we are clothed in the beauty of the glory of God instead of sorrow and distress, then we will shine. Of that, there can be no doubt.

Back to my all enveloping 'Red Original' full length insulated jacket with all of its cosiness. It would be easy to sit all day – chocolates and hot cocoa to hand, good book to read and TV remote close by. This would not be a life, at least not a life as God intends, and certainly not a life that fosters an open and generous heart. We are to put on and share the beauty of the glory of God. This I what we share. This is what bestows integrity.

(The author of this reflection is a friend of Fr Jock who lives in Northumberland)