

ORDINARY SUNDAY 22 YEAR A 2008

In the name.....

Over the last century an interesting thing has happened in Western culture that has never been seen before, it is the development of the personality cult.

This cult has slowly grown throughout the last century to an extent that it has now taken over much of popular culture and invades our newspapers and other forms of media. I believe that this cult of the personality is very dangerous and damaging both to the lives of the people who become part of it and also to wider society who see their, so called, role models and leaders doing ridiculous things just to maintain their place in the limelight and having every little bit of their lives scrutinised by people whose only real interest is in making money.

How did this all come about?

In the nineteenth century it took weeks for news to get from one part of the world to another, now it just takes seconds. The nineteenth century had its stars of the stage and podium but their fame was often limited to particular countries or region, or to a particular section or groups within society.

By the turn of the century people like Dame Nelly Melba, Anna Pavlova, Jenny Lind became internationally known performers only because they were prepared to travel long distances to please their audience.

With the development, in the early years of the 20th century of faster transport and more importantly the film industry, things began to change.

Performers could be in different parts of the world within a matter of days and with the development of the film industry it

was not even necessary for them to travel at all. They could make a film in Hollywood and that film could be seen all over the world in a matter of weeks. So the Silent Screen Stars were born, people like Buster Keeton and Charlie Chaplin, became household names, and news about their lives and loves also began to be part of their fame.

As the cult of movies and movie stars grew the more their lives were taken over, not just their professional lives, but every single moments of their lives, stars became public property and nothing was sacred.

But the celebrity cult did not just stay confined to Hollywood and the film industry, pop music also bought in, as did some of the royal families of Europe, television celebrities, and politicians.

The result of all of this is what we see today, new stars are created over night and as soon as they become famous they are assassinated by the very same people who created them.

Next time you are in the supermarket have a look at the covers of the magazines, Britney Spears in trouble with the law again, why? Jennifer Aniston in another relationship crisis, why? Posh and Becks having marital problems, why?

Perhaps this all has something to do with the pressure that their lives are under because of the endless media speculation and invasion of their lives.

Western culture has got itself into this cult of the personality and it is destructive of all who are touched by it, except those who profit from it.

Young people grow up thinking that their lives will only be successful if they are famous, if they are rich, if they are skinny, and if they have blonde hair, perfect skin an expensive car,

multiple lovers etc. It is a vicious cycle and a totally unnatural way in which to live and as I witnessed many times living in Monte Carlo, it so often ends in alcoholism, drug addiction, sex addiction, depression and despair.

The only beneficiaries of this is the relentless media always looking for its next star to create, devour and then tear to pieces. And we get sucked into this because we are told that this is news and that we should know all about it. Nonsense! This is not news and we do not need to know what people are doing in their private lives, whether they be famous sports stars, media presenters, film stars, musicians or ordinary people like you and me.

I believe that this sort of media coverage is destructive of the people concerned and of society as it reduces people's lives to being a commodity, something that is interesting and entertaining for a while, but then gets thrown onto the rubbish heap with all the other commodities of our present age.

Jesus was aware of this tendency in humans, even in his day and age. In our gospel today Jesus and His disciples were at Caesarea Philippi. Their ministry to this point had been a stunning success. Crowds pressed in on them everywhere they went. People eagerly reached out to touch this attractive young teacher from Nazareth.

Even the disciples themselves were caught up in the excitement of it all when Jesus asked them, "Who do you say I am?" and Simon Peter answered enthusiastically, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" It was one of the most dramatic moments in the disciples' pilgrimage with Jesus.

Then Jesus changed the subject. He began to tell them that the crowds would soon turn against Him; He would be crucified, and on the third day he would be raised. The disciples didn't know what to make of all this. Simon Peter took Jesus aside: "Forbid it, Lord, that these things should happen to you." Jesus'

response to Simon Peter is as harsh as any words in the New Testament: "Get behind me Satan! You are not on the side of God but of man."

Perhaps Jesus called Simon Peter 'Satan' because of his experience in the wilderness immediately after His baptism by John. In today's parlance, it was there that Satan revealed to Jesus the way to make a million dollars in three easy steps by turning stones to bread, and leaping off the pinnacle of the temple, and bowing down to worship him (Satan).

I see Satan not as a red caped figure with a pitchfork but as a man dressed in a \$800 Armarni suit and offering in a glib and polished tongue instant success, instant glamour, instant gratification. We can see Satan almost anywhere today where people offer instant fame, instant success, instant wealth.

But this time Jesus encountered him in his strongest supporter Simon Peter: "Forbid it, Lord, that you should have to suffer and die."

But Jesus' way is different. He knew that he could not trust the words of Satan, or even of his best friend, he had to be true to God and do God's will.

If there is any doubt that Jesus was resisting the lure of the easy way, listen to the words that follow: "If any one would be my disciple, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The way of the Christian is not always the easy way, the safe way, the popular way, but it is the way that we are called to follow, because it is the life-giving, not, the life-taking way.

It is said that St. Augustine was accosted one day on the street by a former mistress some time after he had become a Christian. When he saw her he turned and walked the other way.

Surprised, the woman called out, "Augustine, it is I". Augustine as he kept going the other way, answered her, "Yes, but it is not I."

It is an amusing story - one that comes close to making the same point the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer made when he wrote "When Christ calls a person to follow him, he calls that person to die."

We too must follow that route as unpopular as it might make us at times because it is the route that leads to the grace and peace of being in the presence of God.