

Disciple of Jesus, the fool hanging from the wood

Homily at the Mass in suffrage of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI

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In a village in Denmark there was a circus. It happened one night that the circus caught fire. The circus owner instructed one of the clowns to go to the village and tell the villagers about the fire and beg them to come to the aid of the circus workers who were trying to put out the fire. However, the clown soon realised that despite his cries, no one was listening to him; not because the people did not hear him, but because they saw that the one who shouted was a clown and they treated him as such. They thought it was some kind of publicity stunt to entice people to visit the circus. The people did not believe him and ignored him. The clown was not understood.

This tale is found in one of the writings of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard. But it is also the tale with which Joseph Ratzinger opens one of his most beautiful books, *Introduction to Christianity*. Ratzinger, in continuity with Kierkegaard, believes that the believing person, or even the Church, somewhat resembles the clown of the tale. They shout but no one pays attention. Today's believing person is the one who is constantly misunderstood.

I see a connection in the story of the clown and in the fact that, in 1968, Ratzinger, who was then a young theologian, chose to begin his book with this story: the story of the clown and the personal story of Joseph Ratzinger have affinities. Although Ratzinger never said so explicitly, I glimpse an alignment or at least a similarity between the clown's story and the personal story of the Bavarian theologian pope.

Similar to the clown or the fool, Joseph Ratzinger also had an important message to convey. It was not the destruction of the circus, but the metaphorical destruction that the tyranny of relativism was bringing to European culture. Alas, as happened to the fool, so Ratzinger often remained a misunderstood voice. And this has been a constant in Joseph Ratzinger's life, theology and papacy. Joseph and the Ratzinger family were not understood when, in the Nazi context of Germany, they expressed passive resistance.

Joseph Ratzinger was not understood as a theologian when, in the post-Vatican Council II period, he questioned whether certain reforms proposed by some of his friends were really for the good of the Church. For this, he paid a high price. Not only did he have to give up the prestigious chair he held at the University of Tübingen, but he had to sacrifice his friendship with several fellow theologians. Ratzinger was not understood during his time in Rome as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where he had the reputation of being a rigid and inflexible person - *Panzerkardinal*.

Ratzinger was not understood even as pope. As an example I mention here the speech he gave at the University of Regensburg and his insistence on the interrelationship between reason and faith.

Ratzinger was not understood even when he resigned. His figure and memory are sometimes used and politicised to create an antagonism between Pope Benedict and Pope Francis.

These few examples clearly show how misunderstanding was a constant factor in the life and mission of this man. The story of the clown and the story of Joseph Ratzinger are parallel and similar in so many points. This does not mean, on the one hand, that Ratzinger was unaware that his story was like that of Kierkegaard's clown, nor, on the other hand, that he wished to resemble the clown misunderstood by everyone.

Facing this, Ratzinger had two choices: either to continue to search for the truth and the truth alone - and for him the truth was none other than Jesus himself - with the attendant risk of not being understood by the contemporary world; or to cease being seen as a clown, to compromise with the truth, to cease searching for what is right, good and true. For Ratzinger, the choice was obvious. He was never willing to compromise with the truth, to cease seeking the truth, whatever the cost. Certainly Ratzinger would not have wanted to be the clown, but sometimes being the clown is the price you have to pay if you want to live by the truth.

Ratzinger was a man who sought the truth above all else, but he was also the humble man who never claimed to know everything or to have found the whole truth. In fact, his whole life was a continuous search for truth, a never-ending desire to enter into the mystery of God. And when he did not understand God, he was not afraid to ask, as he did when he visited the Auschwitz concentration camp: "Why, Lord, did you remain silent? Why could you tolerate all this?" (Speech at Auschwitz-Birkenau, 28 May 2006). Ratzinger's search for truth was never without humility before the ever greater mystery of God.

Finally, despite being a brilliant theologian, the truth that Ratzinger sought was never an abstract truth. Pascal distinguished between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Ratzinger did the same. He did not seek philosophical concepts, but the God of Jesus Christ. It was his love for this God, his encounter with Jesus, that guided his whole life. In fact, as he used to say: "At the beginning of being a Christian there is not an ethical decision or a great idea, but the encounter with an event, with a Person, who gives life a new horizon and thereby the decisive direction" (*Deus caritas est*, 1). This Person is Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate Epiphany. The Magi left everything to go in search of the child. T. S. Eliot, in his poem *The Journey of the Magi*, says "this was all folly". It is folly to leave everything to go in search of a child. The madness of the Magi resembles Ratzinger's madness. The search for Jesus Christ, the embodied truth, the shining star of his life, drove him to do astounding, seemingly insane things, and for them he had to pay a high price, including that of seeming to be a misunderstood clown.

Joseph Ratzinger needs to put us - the Church in Malta and Gozo - in crisis. For we too, as the years go by, become more and more like that misunderstood clown. I believe that in this context we must ask ourselves why we appear to be fools. Have we perhaps gutted the message of Christ? If so, we must review what we say and the way we express and live it. But there may be another reason. We may look like fools because we try to be authentic disciples of the truth of the gospel; because there has always been and always will be hostility to the gospel message in the world (cf. Jn 15:18). If this is the reason we look like fools, then we can look to the figure of Pope Benedict and take him as a model. He who never compromised with the truth, come what may. He believed that salvation, in the end, comes from foolishness: for we are disciples of the crucified Jesus, the fool hanging from the wood, scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (cf. 1 Cor 1:23).

Such is the choice Ratzinger made. Not an easy choice, which comes at a high price. This is the choice we are invited to make as Church and as Christians. And if a moment of discouragement sometimes arises, let us remember what Benedict XVI said at the beginning of his pontificate: 'Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and gives everything. Whoever gives himself to him, receives a hundredfold. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ - and you will find true life' (Homily at the beginning of the Petrine ministry, 24 April 2005).