

There's a remarkable line in today's first reading from the Book of Isaiah – the Lord will make priests and Levites of pagans, or more precisely of pagan converts brought to Jerusalem as part of the great in-gathering of all nations. This is a radical vision both for the Judaism of its day and for us as Christians now and chimes nicely with Pope Francis's vision of a Church re – evangelised from the margins – yes, it's that troublesome man again who seems to be taking the Church apart, demolishing the work of centuries, destabilising what was once a great institution – if we're not careful he'll be nationalising the railways next and so on. But his programme is far more radical than that – it's to reinvest the Church with holiness, with that conversion of heart which is what Jesus is all about, and God has always been all about, as prophets such as Isaiah well knew. It's to keep us on the move, trusting only in God, against our prevailing and perennial tendency to settle down, build structures and place our trust in great buildings and, dare one say, liturgical 'tat'. We can see this dynamic at work in the Pope's choice of cardinals

'Francis has torn up all three unwritten rules (in choosing cardinals) bypassing traditional sees in favour of lesser places in the Catholic heartlands, and, most dramatically of all, choosing cardinals in remote, far-flung missionary territories, many of which are poor or suffering in some way.' (page 183 Wounded Shepherd)

Austin Ivereagh gives some delightful examples of men in these far-flung places only finding out about their choice as cardinal at the same time as everyone else – a deliberate policy to curb gossip and speculation' - and often indeed only after everyone else. Cardinal Charles Maung Bo of Myanmar, for example, found out from his niece in Australia, who had seen it in on TV.

The first reaction is often disbelief.

And that's not a bad reaction from someone in the midst of suffering and poverty and as such a sign and witness of hope to the rest of us – for although in one reckoning we may appear to be richer and suffering less, the experience of alienation and disorientation which suffering brings is common to both rich and poor alike – only some know it and others don't, not yet that is. This is the narrow gate through which we all have at some point to pass; the experience of failure perhaps, as mentioned last week, in the break-up of a marriage, in the break- down of a family, in bereavement, in knowing our children face a desolate future, in knowing that this society no longer works. And it's the people on the margins who will teach us how to find a way through – we may think that we have a gospel to give them, but they have a gospel to teach us and it's one in which suffering may appear as a punishment but can, dare one say, also be received as a gift

'Of course any punishment is most painful at the time, and far from pleasant: but later, in those on whom it has been used, it bears fruit in peace and goodness. So hold up your limp arms and steady your trembling knees and smooth out the path you tread, then the injured limb will not be wrenched, it will grow strong again.'

'Yes there are those now last who will be first, and those now first (or rather perhaps who think of themselves as first) who will be last.'

No-one is excluded in this statement – it's just that suffering comes sooner to some than others.

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