

Reflection
by Fr *Gerry McFlynn*
at the annual Pax Christi
memorial service for
Franz Jägerstätter
August 2007

We meet to commemorate Franz Jägerstätter in the year when the Vatican has announced that he is to be officially recognised for what we have always known him to be, namely, a martyr for peace. On first consideration Franz Jägerstätter might strike one as a most unlikely candidate as a martyr of peace for our time, but his story is important for us because it is both old and modern. It is old because it repeats the story of all those wonderful men and women who down the centuries have stood in God's holy fire and spoken out against the violence and tyranny of the world, spoken the truth to the principalities and powers of darkness mentioned in the scriptures. It is modern because it reminds us of the importance of saying NO. And we desperately need to relearn the art of saying NO today, given the world we live in and the means and methods employed by those who rule it. Rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's has never been more difficult or more urgent. I'm reminded here of what Dorothy Day once said about this. The only way to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, she said, is to own very little; that way you'll have little to render him!

Today we are expected to say YES to the peace of Caesar. We would do well to recall what the original peace of the Roman state was really like. It was the peace of the established ruination, of the settled lie. It was a peace that fed on innumerable deaths on the battlefields, in the mines and in the public arenas. It was a peace which demanded a lot of human sacrifice in one way or another; a lot of torn flesh, spilt blood and broken families. In short, it was much like the peace of our own time! And the first followers of Jesus broke through this peace by speaking out about something that was intolerable to most Romans, Jews and Greeks - a new peace - the peace of God, which the world could not understand. And this speaking out continues right up to this day where people of faith, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, challenge the false peace of the world, a peace built on the threat of war, violence, exploitation, discrimination, and repression.

To say that Christians should always obey the state, no matter what it asks, is to say that Caesar has priority over the authority of God in our lives. I would contend that we are to obey the civil law only when we can do so without disobeying God. When the state requires that we disobey our conscience as people under the authority of God, then we must disobey the law.

Franz Jägerstätter may not have understood all this or even thought of it, but in his own simple and uncomplicated way he did what all good men and women of every age have done and continue to do: he got to know God and to see things as God might see them. And in doing so he came to learn where God was not to be found. God is not to be found today in the proliferation of nuclear weapons which has continued at a frightening pace since Hiroshima and Nagasaki; nor is he to be found in the violence of the world's powers, the exploitation of the world's resources, the policies and warlike rhetoric of today's world leaders and the centres of their political power. Instead, he is to be found wherever people suffer the consequences of their policies, among the refugees of war, famine and natural disasters. He is to be found with the poor and powerless of the world, the weak and those who in terms of the world, count for little or nothing.

Few people willingly seek martyrdom. But we know that in certain times and places, to know God and to speak God's name is to risk one's own life. So in this regard Franz Jägerstätter's death is like any other martyr's death. And yet it is a story with strong implications for our own time. Franz did not die because he was a Catholic or a Christian. And nor did he die as a missionary in a far-off country. He died because he refused to be complicit in the evil of his time. Franz Jägerstätter came to learn the hard way that a true follower of Christ could not be a good citizen caught up in the public sin of the world.

And this issue of citizenship goes to the very heart of the matter. In both the Old and New Testaments God and his kingdom are viewed as the only objects of ultimate authority and loyalty. If the state presumes to demand such allegiance, it must be politely ignored. In the New Testament specifically, the new element is that the people of God transcend national boundaries. The citizenship of the Christian belongs in heaven, the kingdom of God. On earth the person of faith lives as an ambassador of a foreign power, a stranger, a pilgrim, but never a citizen. It means living as part of a foreign people in one's native land, obeying the rules of an alternative society and spreading the influence of this 'foreign' society. The words "Jesus is Lord" were politically and socially incompatible with the words "Caesar is Lord".

So when our political leaders lead us into nightmares of human destruction such as we are witnessing in Afghanistan and Iraq and then try to persuade us that what they are doing is for the common good, the believing person refuses to be taken in by such lying rhetoric. The believing person says: "I will try to speak God's name in the midst of this madness and do what I can to stop it".

That is what Franz Jägerstätter did. That is what his life and death speak to us about – resisting and taking a stand. His life captures our imagination because he confronted the great social and political evil of his time so clearly, and came to know the full cost of standing by the Word of God when confronted by evil.

What then is his significance for us who gather here today? I think it is clear that we too are challenged to confront the civil powers of our time. And it is an issue of profound moral significance for us who have witnessed on our television screens in recent years the needless killing of tens of thousands of civilians, the raining of bombs on the heads of the innocent. We live in a time when it is perhaps more important than ever before to learn how to say NO. NO to what much of society today would have us say YES to. NO to violence in all its forms, no to discrimination, racism, sexism, militarism, consumerism, and every other ism that militates against the wellbeing of a brother or sister. And this not in any negative sense but in a very positive sense that offers hope and meaning in life and points to a different set of values, a different way of living. Its part of what I would call a theology of resistance – the only theology relevant for our time or indeed any time!

Franz Jägerstätter was a resister who died a solitary witness, terribly alone, probably with doubts about what he was doing. Indeed, his life has come to be known to us almost by accident. Daniel Ellsberg, whose publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 helped end the Vietnam War, has said that he was influenced to act as he did by Franz Jägerstätter's moral resistance. And more than sixty years after his death, the fact that we are gathered here this evening is testimony to the power of his witness.

Franz's life tells us that a single act of resistance is like planting a seed in the ground. Our lives consist of planting such seeds and leaving the rest to God. We should do all we can and leave the harvest to God. And Franz, being a farmer, would have known all about seeds growing. His death reminds us that as a community of faith we are challenged to resist what we know to be evil.

And there is something else in Franz's story which is significant for us and for a faith community in search of new models of gospel witness. The witness for which we rightly honour FJ was a joint witness. His decision to resist to the death was not made in isolation. It was a joint decision with his wife, Franziska. His may have been the more dramatic action; but hers was no less dramatic in its decision to live out that act of resistance for the rest of her life. A seven year long marriage turned became a lifelong marriage of resistance, a marriage consecrated to the work of peace.

We live today in a culture of celebrity when the cult of the individual has never been so prominent. Well, we in the community of faith have our very own celebrities - the saints and martyrs. These are the people we look up to and admire because of the lives they led and the witness they gave. We need their special feast days and commemorations to remind us of our true values and what it means to be followers of the Way. They may have lived in different times and under different cultures, but they still have much to teach us about being faithful to a way of life and the values that inform it. It has been said that Christians are those who know where they are going in life because they know where they are coming from. We constantly need reminding about where we have come from.

The anniversaries of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which we mark this week remind us powerfully that what is at stake in the charnal house world we now inhabit is frail human flesh, and whether that flesh will be allowed to continue to exist or will be destroyed in unprecedented quantities. It reminds us too that our first loyalty should be to those members of our own species who are poor and powerless and unable to defend themselves; the poor and oppressed, the despised and rejected. In short, those among whom Jesus lived and for whom he died and continues to die daily, even in our midst. These are the first victims of modern warfare since they are already being deprived of life's essentials in order to pay for it.

However, we are here today not just to recall the horror of those days in 1945, but also to reflect on what we can do to make our world today a more peaceful place and, in particular, what lessons we can learn from the witness of Franz Jägerstätter. The scriptures tell us that we must first turn back to God as Franz did and place all our hope and trust in Him. They tell us, too, that we will have to work much harder on behalf of our brothers and sisters everywhere. And they challenge us, as they did Franz Jägerstätter, to lay down our fear of the enemy since we are all members of God's family and our lives are interconnected.

And so today we pray that Franz Jägerstätter's life will continue to inspire us to witness to the Gospel which, as another of our readings reminds us, is the lamp for lighting our way through the dark until the dawn comes and the morning star rises in our mind.