

Homily

4th Sunday of Easter

7/05/17

'I have come that they might have life - and have it in abundance!' That's a more literal translation of the end of the gospel, and it's a powerful phrase. 'I have come that they might have life and have it in abundance' That's about here and now. Recently on the BBC there was a programme about Nietzsche, the philosopher. I was looking forward to it, as I didn't know a great deal about him, and I was mesmerised by the account of his life and work. He was a 19th century philosopher who had a powerful effect on the secular society we have today. It's worth knowing about those who created the society we have today, through their thoughts and ideas.

Nietzsche was the son of a Lutheran pastor, and he had been to theological college himself, to train as a minister, but he lost his faith upon the death of his father. He left college and took up philosophy instead. Over a period of time he began to believe that God was dead - certainly to him, and so he began to search for a new meaning of life. He said that if God didn't exist, then all the morality and all the civilisation we've inherited, has been based on a falsehood.

He started to unpick the Christian bits of morality, and decided that Christianity was a slave mentality. He had no time for pity or compassion. He said people who were enslaved needed pity and compassion, and these virtues, he concluded, were not in keeping with his ideas of a Godless morality for modern man. He said that as God was dead, which in his view science seemed to prove, then there was no basis for objective truth - you couldn't say

something was objectively right or wrong. That would even include murder. Nietzsche sought a new morality, through the Dionysian tradition, based on human desire. He said the strong had been held back by Christianity, and that human desires, and all it revels in, is the best basis for progressing humanity. He uses a German word 'ubermensch' - superman. He says that we should all be left to achieve, free of Christian morals and restraints. He said that suffering, for ourselves and others, was necessary to achieve this new powerful superman. Does this ring any alarm bells?

All dictators throughout history have used this kind of philosophy to justify their disregard for human misery - they're creating a new world so suffering is the price you pay. The presenter of the BBC programme was making out that Nietzsche was a genius, struggling to find meaning in life. He would apparently have been horrified that Hitler took up Nietzsche's ideas and made them the official philosophy and basis for the Third Reich. Hitler embodied Nietzsche's views when he 'starred' in the Nazi propaganda film, 'The Triumph of the Will,' and flew in an aeroplane over Nuremburg, as the new superman. The opposite of 'Ubermench' - superman, is another Nazi word, 'Untermench' - subhuman, and we know where that led!

Sadly, in his late 40's Nietzsche ended up in an insane asylum. We know that insanity is a very cruel disease, and is no arbiter of people, but my question would be, can we not connect the lack of meaning in life, the struggle with existence, and such extreme views, with the gradual unravelling of the mind? I think it would be very hard to say there's no connection at all. And let's take his idea that Christianity is the philosophy of the weak. I'm thinking of all those incredible powerful people throughout history,

whose Christian faith inspired them to achieve incredible things. No positive reform in society has been achieved without the input and energy of people whose lives were modelled on the teachings of Jesus Christ. If you think about our own country: The abolition of slavery, the development of social justice for workers, the provision of healthcare and education- before the State became more involved, the beginnings of the great charity organisations and much more, ALL begun and inspired by people of Christian faith. Even politicians of the same century as Nietzsche, people whose faith mattered to them, were doing wonderful things. Gladstone for example, spent much of his private time rescuing women from prostitution, and providing for them and their families.

'I have come that they may have life, and have it in abundance!' That message is spattered throughout the Old Testament, and of course, and especially in the New Testament. The whole message of Christianity is about LIFE - here and now, and in the eternal LIFE to come! Even Moses when he gave the Ten Commandments was saying, 'Today I give you a choice - follow this way and you will have life.' He wasn't talking just about the hereafter, he was talking about NOW! All this of course powerfully refutes Nietzsche's erroneous ideas that Christianity is all about 'pie in the sky when you die.' 'I give you a choice.....' Read up on Nietzsche and ask yourself if his ideas really bring joy, fulfilment, and life in this world, or do they bring death.

The ideas of Nietzsche and others helped to create the secular society we have today. We need to be aware of those ideas, and be able to confidently proclaim another and more permanent philosophy, that Jesus Christ came to bring us life - and life in ABUNDANCE!