

24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

G.K. Chesterton has a story about a popular philanthropist. The main reason for his popularity was his unfailing good humour. No one bothered to ask how he managed to be always happy. They assumed he was born an optimist.

But then one day he was found dead in mysterious circumstances. Foul play was immediately suspected. However the case completely baffled police. However, it was Chesterton's unlikely detective, Fr. Browne, who solved the case. His verdict – the man committed suicide.

At first the people refused to accept Fr. Browne's verdict. They couldn't imagine how such a happy man could commit suicide. But then it emerged that there was a serious side to the funny man. He who made others laugh was in fact a deeply depressed man. But he could never tell anyone how he really felt.

The man had two lives. One open, seen and known by all. The other secret, and known only to himself. In public he was the man who smiled at everyone. But in private he was wounded and desperate.

He felt he had to live up to people's expectations in return for their attention and esteem. He was never able to be himself. Finally, he realized that his whole life was based on a lie. The strain of trying to maintain the public image became so great that he could no longer cope with the pain. So he committed suicide.

Everybody likes to be well-thought of. So people try to carve out for themselves a favourable image in the eyes of others. And they will do anything to maintain that image.

In today's Gospel we see how little attention Jesus paid to what other people thought of him, even though their image of him was a favourable one. The people regarded him as a great prophet. Peter went further,. He declared him to be the Christ or the Messiah.

It would be impossible to exaggerate what the Messiah meant to the Jews. Perhaps only a people whose land is occupied by a foreign power and who are put down, mistreated and humiliated would really understand. Many thought that this Messiah would be a great military leader – another King David who would restore Israel to its former military greatness. Obviously this is what Peter thought.

But this wasn't Jesus' idea of the Messiah. He told the apostles that the Messiah would himself suffer as Isaiah the prophet had foretold – described in our first reading today. He didn't want them to have false hopes only to be disappointed later, and feel that he had deceived them.

But Peter couldn't countenance the idea that Jesus would suffer. He was determined to save him from such a fate. We can sympathise with Peter. We want to save from suffering those we love. But as much as we might love someone, we have no right to stand in the way of his or her destiny.

Jesus reprimanded Peter. He had no intention of living up to popular expectations. He was not swayed by what people thought, or wanted, or expected of him. He was true to himself and to what God wanted of him.

Whatever our path in life, what really matters is that we should be ourselves, our unique selves, but the best that we can be – the kind of people that God intended us to be. The only thing that matters is to be true to ourselves. Any other path is a false trail and will not result in growth, or happiness, or fulfillment or holiness.

A watch may have a gold chain – but if it doesn't tell the time it is useless.

A fruit tree may be teeming with blossoms, but if it doesn't produce fruit it is useless.

A lamp may be studded with diamonds, but if it doesn't give light it is worthless.

And a faith that doesn't result in good works is dead.

The fruit of prayer is faith.

The fruit of faith is love.

The fruit of love is service.

And the fruit of service is peace.