

NATHANIEL

During January I am attempting to do a bit of a clean out – two rooms done though the easiest I admit!

I was sorting through an old pile of coins – you know they can accumulate in jars and in drawers – when I came across 3 old pound coins that hadn't been exchanged for the new pound coin by the deadline last October. I could just put them in a yellow envelope but I am not sure I would be popular!

They are just 3 of the estimated 500 million, yes million, that are still lying around in drawers and jars in people's houses.

Anyway, around the time that the new pound coin came out there was an article in one of the Sunday papers about the origin of the pound.

Seemingly the first pound coin was minted in 1489. Up to that time it was only a notional amount used in book-keeping. Nobody in those days would ever dream of having a pound in their pocket – after all it was the price of 15 head of cattle – over £20,000 today. That's inflation for you!

Having a pound in your pocket in those days would also have been difficult, for it was literally a pound weight, it took 240 silver pennies to make up the weight, hence for those of you who remember pre-decimal days, there were 240 pennies in a pound!

But the original silver penny didn't remain pure silver for long. Seemingly it began to be debased in the reign of Henry 8th, who paid his troops in Ireland with a coin that had 10% less silver content than those used in England. (And we haven't forgotten!!)

Later, Charles 2nd began to mint copper pennies and the value was debased further.

Interesting as all that may be, you may be wondering what has it got to do with today's readings, and in particular with Nathaniel about whom we heard in today's Gospel!

Well, Jesus used a coin to teach about our duty to God and to the State, so there is good precedence there, and I want to draw out some meanings and comparisons between Nathaniel and the story of the pound.

For example, Jesus said of Nathaniel that he was a man "in whom there is no deceit."

Unlike the silver penny in Henry 8th's time, Nathaniel was pure through and through. There was nothing bad or base about him. He was a sincere person.

In Bible times there was a great business in Ephesus making silver statues of the goddess Diana – the patron saint of the Ephesians. Silversmiths made lots of money selling their statues.

But some of them got too greedy and instead of casting them in solid silver, some made them hollow and filled the cavity with wax to make them heavy and so appear solid. But when word got round about this base trick, business was about to fold for all silversmiths – until the genuine ones put up a sign in their stalls *Sine Cere*, Latin for “without wax”. Hence the word ‘sincere’ that we have today, meaning a person who is true, all the way through.

Like Nathaniel, a person “in whom there is no deceit.”

And then Nathaniel, like the original pound, was really worth his weight in silver, all 240 of them. Tradition has it that after the Resurrection Nathaniel became the bearer of the Gospel to India and Armenia, dying a martyr’s death by crucifixion, like Jesus.

Nathaniel was a stayer; he was loyal, he was steadfast. Qualities, virtues that are eternal. In the old days there was a sign outside a shoemaker’s shop – “Wanted: Lasters and Good Finishers.” People who could use a last and finish the leather with a shine. A Laster and a Good Finisher could also describe Nathaniel.

Loyalty and steadfastness and stickability are just as much needed today, and sometimes, sadly, they are in short supply. Not many, like Nathaniel, are willing for the sacrifice of the long haul.

And thirdly, it struck me when reading that article about the origins of the pound that history is not only interesting but invaluable.

For you’ve got to know where you’ve come from to get a perspective on where you are now and where you hope to go.

Nathaniel was such a reflective person. When Jesus saw him he was sitting under a fig tree. The fig tree in Palestine was almost another room. It grew 15 feet high but its branches spread 25 feet when fully grown.

It provided space and shade. Many houses in Palestine were one-roomed with one small window. The house was not only used for cooking but also for stabling animals and so could become unbearably hot and smelly. Certainly not a place to relax in. So many householders grew fig trees beside their houses to provide a cool place for reflection and thought.

We know that Nathaniel was a searcher for the truth – a person who thought deeply about life and its meaning. A book on spirituality that came out some years ago began with these words:- “Superficiality is the curse of the age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is the curse of the age. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but of deep people.”

We can think of some examples of people in power who tweet immediate responses causing endless trouble and grief when a little time for thought and reflection would have been wiser and more beneficial.

It was Pascal who said,

“All the troubles of life come upon us because we refuse to sit quietly for a while each day in our rooms.” That may be an exaggeration but the basic point is true.

And Nathaniel gives us a timely example of the need to take time for reflection and thought, and now and again to step off the ceaseless merry-go-round of modern life. There is really no virtue in the modern day syndrome of TATT – Tired All The Time.

So I hope that the history of the pound coin will help us get to know Nathaniel better and encourage you to follow his example.

Like the early silver coins, Nathaniel was true, all the way through. He was sincere, a man in whom there was no deceit

And secondly, the early coins were worth their weight in silver. And so was Nathaniel – a Laster and Good Finisher, loyal and dependable, a stayer.

And finally, Nathaniel was a reflective person, who knew the value of stillness and quietness in his life. What did Isaiah say all those years ago? “They who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.”

Nathaniel: you could say he was not only a sound man, but a pound man!