



Saints – Franz Jägerstätter

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Matthew 5: 1–11 2 Thessalonians 2: 1–13

Anomia, dikaiosune, krima
reflections on the witness of Franz Jägerstätter

I'm greatly honoured by the invitation to speak to you this evening. My subject is Franz Jägerstätter, executed in Berlin in 1943 on a charge of undermining military morale.

The Letter to the Thessalonians tells us: *the mystery of iniquity doth already work*. Iniquity, in Latin *iniquitas*, in Greek *anomia*, suggests not so much the absence of law as the presence of a distorted law, a law confused and corrupted by a dangerous admixture of untruth.

According to St Matthew, *blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*.

The two readings fit together, as I see it, because the just man, in Greek the *dikaios*, is the standard, in fact the only standard, by which iniquity or false law or not-law can be revealed for what it is.

I would like to introduce yet a third Greek word. In the Septuagint and the New Testament, the just person's capacity for right judgment is rendered by the word *krima* or *krisis*. Here are a couple of lines from the second chapter of Zephaniah in which, to make my point, I translate *krima* as discernment:

Seek the Lord,
all you, the humble of the earth...
Practise discernment,
seek justice...

In St John 9 v39, Jesus states:

It is for *krima* that I came into this world, so that the blind might see.

In another of the prophets, Zechariah, the ability to 'see', to form a right judgment about a shared situation, is the gift of a pure Spirit; in St John, it is gift of the Holy Spirit Himself. This gift of seeing is always interwoven with humility and with the quality of mercy.

Franz Jägerstätter, under circumstances of not-law, of rising iniquity, exhibited, precisely, *krima*: he knew how to separate truth from falsehood. For that reason, I put him forward this evening as a light for our times.

Of course, our circumstances do not bear direct comparison with circumstances in Austria in the early 1940s. Nevertheless, even for us, the décor is changing; 'the stage-sets are collapsing', in the words of Albert Camus. An old member of Trinity, Sir Paul Tucker, in his book *Unelected Power*, describes the difficult questions of discernment faced by central bankers without there being pre-existing rules to guide them. In finance, research, healthcare, diplomacy, military affairs, the social media, and of course in politics, we need women and men who bring their whole selves to the workplace; whose judgments are not determined merely by their surroundings.

Franz Jägerstätter was born in May 1907 in Sankt Radegund, a town of 500 people in Upper Austria very close to the border with Bavaria. Franz's parents were not married. As a child Franz lived in the large, impoverished household of his mother's mother. In 1915, his father died at the Front. In 1917, his mother Rosalia married Heinrich Jägerstätter, who owned some land. The couple had no children of their own. Eventually it became clear that Franz would inherit a house and a farm.

Franz left home in his early twenties to work first in Bavaria and then in the mines in southern Austria. He returned to Sankt Radegund when his foster father became seriously ill. In 1933, when Franz was 26, a young single woman in Sankt Radegund gave birth to a daughter. Franz was the father. His daughter was sent to be cared for by her mother's mother.

Franz then became friendly with Franziska Schwaninger, who worked as a kitchen maid in the local guesthouse. Franziska had been considering becoming a religious sister. When she decided that she liked Franz, she asked him one question, 'What are your plans for Sunday?' This was a test. She wanted to know whether Franz would mention church.

Franz, with Franziska's blessing, was able to stay in touch with his first daughter. Franz and Franziska married. They had three children of their own.

At the time of the Anschluss, Franz Jägerstätter was thirty years old. Upper Austria, the birthplace of Adolf Hitler, was on the way to becoming the jewel in the crown of National Socialism. It was a source of personnel for the new structures; home to Mauthausen concentration camp; a centre for some of the main experiments in euthanasia. Linz was intended to become a showcase of the Reich. In the plebiscite, going against the current, Franz Jägerstätter cast his vote against the Anschluss, the only 'no' vote in Sankt Radegund. Franz had had a dream that the people of Austria were climbing onto a train headed straight for the abyss of Purgatory; Purgatory, said Franz, not hell; he was clinging to the hope of redemption. Over the next few years, Franz developed an intimate conviction that the enemy of human nature was at work there and then in the ideology of National Socialism.

From June to October 1940, Franz Jägerstätter was conscripted for military training at the garrison in Enns. It was only a matter of time before he was called up for actual service. In December 1940, Franz and his friend and fellow-conscript Rudolf Meyer joined the third order of the Franciscans as a special form of prayer in the situation in which they found themselves as anti-Nazis. From summer 1941, Franz acted as the sacristan in Sankt Radegund parish church; he began to attend Mass every day; people in the village criticised him for too much piety and for taking on too many tasks, including deliveries of bread to poor families.

Franz's conviction that National Socialism was evil and that its wars were evil brought him into a situation for which there were no reliable maps. He had a disagreement with his mother Rosalia; she said that the risks he was running were a betrayal of his wife and children. In 1942, Franz mentioned in confession that he intended to refuse military service; the priest refused him absolution, on the grounds that under the circumstances this was a

form of suicide. Friends in whom Franz confided, not Nazi sympathisers, took the position that a citizen had a duty to obey the civil power unless and until he was ordered to do something intrinsically wrong. These friends did not see service in the Wehrmacht as wrong in itself. On the contrary, there was a line of argument that whatever the flaws of National Socialism, the war against the Bolsheviks was a war worth winning. Franz was granted a meeting with the bishop in Linz – an indication that the sacristan of Sankt Radegund was becoming something of a problem within the local church community. The bishop said later that he did not impose a viewpoint on Franz. Nevertheless, the meeting was painful. Franz was asked to consider whether he lacked humility – was he putting an obsession with public, political issues ahead of his responsibility to his family?

Franz's friend Rudolf Meyer was called up first and was to die in great moral misery during the Stalingrad campaign. Rudolf sent Franz a biography of Thomas More, recently canonised. Franz's principal support in his long anguish was his wife Franziska, who put things very simply: 'I supported Franz as much as I could because otherwise he would have been completely alone.'

On 23 February 1943, the letter arrived. Franz Jägerstätter, now thirty-five years old, was called to Enns to begin his military service. The eldest of his three daughters was not quite six. Franz said good-bye to his family, took the train to Enns, attended Mass, presented himself at the base, and declared that he would not fight in the Wehrmacht. Franz spent the rest of his life in prison, first in Linz and from early May under very harsh conditions at Tegel in Berlin.

In a military trial on 6 July, Jägerstätter stated that he would be acting against his religious conscience were he to fight for the National Socialist State. Franz did ask about the possibility of serving as a paramedic. This was ignored; the only legal issue was whether the prisoner's objection to military service was undermining military morale. Jägerstätter was sentenced to death. The escape route, which remained open up to the last moment, was to agree to fight in Russia.

Jägerstätter's court-appointed lawyer had a further card to play; a message was conveyed to Sankt Radegund that the parish priest and Franziska could visit Berlin. Franz's last visitors came straight to the meeting place off a 22-hour train journey. Franz was thrown roughly out of the back of a lorry in his wife's presence; Franziska was not allowed to share with him the food she had brought all the way from Austria. The parish priest did most of the talking; his message was that Franz was being foolish; an altercation ensued. Finally, Franziska had a moment with her husband. She told him that his decision would be her decision.

The public executioner had a waiting list; we learn that he did so much driving from prison to prison that he had a special exemption from the speed-limit on the autobahn. Over the coming days, the prison chaplain in Tegel did not try to persuade Franz to change his mind. A few days before Franz's execution, another Austrian prisoner, the priest Frank Reinisch, was executed for refusing to swear an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler. Just before his execution, Reinisch said to the chaplain, 'One hour from now, I'll know more about God than you do.' The news about his fellow Austrian brought great consolation to Franz Jägerstätter.

On 9 August 1943, Franz was moved to Brandenburg, where he was executed by guillotine at four hours' notice. During his last hours, Franz wrote a serene letter to Franziska and told the Brandenburg chaplain that he did not want a bible because he was too busy talking to God.

That evening, the chaplain went to some Austrian religious sisters from the congregation that Franziska Schwaninger had considered joining ten years before. This is what the chaplain said:

I congratulate you on this fellow-country-man of yours who lived as a saint and died a hero. I am absolutely certain that this simple man is the only saint I have met in my life.

At the first opportunity after the war, these Austrian nuns brought Franz's ashes back to Sankt Radegund. The municipality refused to put the name of Franz Jägerstätter on the local war memorial. A pension for Franziska was not approved until 1950.

In the late 1980s, forty-five years after refusing absolution to Jägerstätter, the former parish priest of Sankt Radegund wrote to Franziska, 'Your husband Franz rejected falsehood of any kind. And I often pray that he will forgive me.'

When Franz had taken a job in Tittmoning in Bavaria in the 1920s, the neighbour across the road was a German official called Ratzinger. In June 2007, the neighbour's boy Joseph Ratzinger declared Franz Jägerstätter a martyr. On 26 October 2007, Franz was beatified in a ceremony at the New Cathedral in Linz.

Throughout the summer of 1943, Franz Jägerstätter exercised *krima*, remaining faithful to his personal understanding of right and wrong in a grim political situation. In Linz in 2007, the light that Franz could see in the darkness of Tegel prison became a light for Austria and for Europe. In the congregation that day was Franziska Schwaninger-Jägerstätter. More than sixty-four years had gone by since her final meeting with Franz in this world.

'Everything has become heavier and more massive,' writes the poet Mandelstam; 'therefore man must become harder ... he must be to the earth what diamond is to glass.'

I end on the words of another poet:

Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.