

Woodford Word of Life Reflections 2.

Storms, Gazebos and Grace part 2 (this follows on from last week's article)

How easy is it, to map out lives in which God is a deepening factor? Does education provide this? Where Essex meets East London, there are, of course, families keen to get one child at least into Cambridge or Oxford. A boy from Bancroft's School on the High Road, who happens to be a Catholic, might move on to those secluded College cloisters and there ponder on world injustices at the Las Casas Institute. Should he be content to say that these call for better policing? It makes a great difference to life whether we imagine grace creating a culture of fairness, or a culture of generosity, or one of sensitive listening. Conversations pursued in markets or eating places in Hoxton might introduce a different character outline, one more Dickensian and harsh, to how we picture conversion and the unconverted. We could picture London in terms of Bill Sykes, the ruthless thief. Or we might view Essex from the viewpoint of Dickens' Inspector Bucket tracking down false alibis. Alternatively we could get by with less talk of crime. Lack of honesty damages relationships, but in ways different from lack of sincerity. Both failures are noticed in fiction such as the College reunion occasions in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night*. The best personal step of improvement can simply be to praise an "untroubled mind." Concealed secrets are plentiful, integrity hard to meet.

One hint from Sayers that it makes a difference what guidelines of conversion are at work occurs in the comparison of two women academics with "an unaccountable desire to wander." "Miss Burrows went to commune with Nature in the Fellows' Garden and Miss Goodwin to commune with a higher Authority in the Chapel" (p. 408). If we are Christians in need of peace, do we have to choose between two sorts of contemplative assessment of reality? We might expect our faith to speak out about genuine love amidst a cultural and religious swirl of undeveloped mentalities met to the East of St. Paul's. The character Harriet Vane is described in the novel as "naturally honest" (p. 61). Can we look for more than this, as a gospel view of grace? That will depend on whether we look for the self-giving of Christ as available to shape conversion.

How do Christian resources reveal ways of channelling grace into anyone's life? They ask us to tap into characteristics of individuals that would make a friendship with them free from storminess, a true gift, in other words. For me to develop friendship with the man dressed like a marketplace Pharaoh would have meant that I have sensitive kindness, a patient willingness to take time to listen to him, and to connect with his underlying cultural desire to be aware of Egyptian culture.

Alternatively, friendship with the IT professional, whose model of right thinking was biblical and even Mesopotamian, meant that the overburdened figure of Job had to be admired. In the first instance, the monotheism of a sun-worshiper had to be the source of constant integrity. In the second instance, a victory over fears attached to horoscope godlings and their Flood would be a key factor. Two separate theologies, in fact. Which of these two styles of religion would also accommodate the notion of being 'naturally honest'? Their ideas of Nature were very dissimilar. Different ideas exist of what any natural reality can contribute to a process of Christian faith sharing God's grace to modern listeners.

Communing with Nature alongside the Nile meant accepting an unvarying routine of sunrises and sunsets, a grand experience. Change of any kind might be a cause for panic. In contrast, communing with recovery patterns, in Mesopotamia's Fertile Crescent, had to include the resilience of the Sumerian culture, people who lived in huts mad from mud, using boats made from reeds, both boats and houses being swept away every 10 or 20 years by the great rivers flooding. Grace here had to be a more homely, provisional experience.

Both Egypt and Sumer made some contributions to the thoughts of those Hebrews who wrote sections of the Old Testament. "Your river in heaven brims over to provide its grain" (Ps. 64:10) is an image using Egyptian ideas of abundance (and likewise of grace). However, the Jewish version of themes like this would have a faith viewpoint, a different relationship, a transcendental one, with God as the Creator. So communing with God happens as a gift, not just by adding up our choices. The liturgies at which we meet and support each other's aim to provide a different, saner musical background to our lives, unlike typical public gatherings. They remind us that opportunities to live by contemplation of a guiding reality from God have been fragmented, and left unused.

Jesus tells us that God achieves his merciful justice where faith is shared between several loving followers. The recovery of an unsplintered viewpoint on the gift of communal fellowship is what most people need if it is available, whether it is met within church circumstances, study settings or times of individual prayer.

Covid 19 Exile in Singapore

It is now exactly one month since my wife and I arrived in Singapore to save the NHS and to escape the 12 weeks shielding provided for us by UK government. But on arrival we found that we had to obey Singapore's SHN (stay at home notice) for 14 days. We had to set our GPS on our mobile phones trackable by Singapore's ICA. On each of the SHN days we would be contacted and twice we were visited by the ICA to make sure we stayed put. We missed out on the 5* Hilton Hotel accommodation since our second son offered us one of his rental flats.

Having overcome our jet lag and felt happy that we managed to escape to the safe city state of Singapore (there were only two deaths at the time compared with 1000+ in the UK) we thought of what we should do during our forced Stay at Home period. Fortunately, my second son has a sister-in-law who is a devout Catholic; each day she religiously sends us a link to an online mass or spiritual reflections:

<http://holyfamily.org.sg/index.php/news-events#daily-reflections>

via Whatsapp. Then I remember that my Spiritual hero, Bishop Barron, recently sent out a video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_VJhBBqE5Y&v=8

about Coronavirus and quarantine. The video was a Godsend since it hits a raw spot on my spiritual nerve. The video starts with a statement from Pascal (17th century mathematician and philosopher) that Man's problem stemmed from his difficulty of sitting at home by himself; he spent most of his time in "divertissement" – war, gambling, etc. Perhaps we still have the same problem four centuries later when we are forced to stay at home.

Like most of us, my diary before lockdown was filled with urgent matters: MOT car, Direct at bridge, Opera and rehearsals at the ROH & the ENO, Parish Partnership, pay balance on Cruise, etc, etc. Why did I (if, not in lockdown, still do) fill up my diary with such "divertissements"? – it keeps me busy so that I don't need to think about important things: my Godson, a bachelor, died recently from cancer, where is he? What was the purpose of his life? Indeed, what is the purpose of my life? What are we missing by not being able to attend church? Aren't online services sufficient? These are difficult questions which one normally try to avoid or put off.

Bishop Barron made a couple of suggestions as to what we should do with all this free time. He suggested reading the Bible. For example, one can start with St Matthew's gospel and perhaps a book in the old testament like Job; he suggests that if one reads the Bible a la Lectio Divina then he promises the bible will come alive. Another suggestion Barron makes is to take some time to read one of the spiritual classics: St Augustine's Confessions especially the first 9 books, St Thomas Aquinas by GK Chesterton, Seven Storey Mountain, etc

It so happens that we were not allowed to roam Singapore after our SHN because Singapore had a second wave of Covid 19 infections due to returning Singaporeans and migrant workers in dormitories. So, just as in the UK, seniors like us are shielded and our children (but not our grandchildren) will do our errands and shopping. Nevertheless, we have now developed a *modus vivendi* daily routine consisting of exercises, online mass or reflections, Whatsapp with our children around the world, simple projects (like family history and photos), emailing our friends, online bridge and spiritual reading. I have actually completed reading St Augustine and Chesterton's St Thomas.

Living in a rental flat we do not have real time television news; this in fact saves us more time since we do not have to concern ourselves with worrying statistics and attempts by world leaders trying to pacify the public. Watching Netflix films is a form of escapism but one worries that what we are watching may not return soon. Of course, youtube is a real source of information and entertainment: from operas, musicals, exercises and inspirational talks. In this connection I would recommend my readers to search for "Bishop Barron and ??????" on youtube where ????? can be atheism, Stephen Fry, Real presence of Christ in Eucharist, etc; indeed I am a subscriber to his youtube channel and a member of "Word on Fire Engage" which I think is most illuminating to Catholics.

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25/4/20, Singapore

Lectio Divina

A couple of weeks ago the homily given by Fr Michael Copps was concerned with things we might do to help our faith during lockdown. One of the items he mentioned was to talk to God but as he said the polite thing to do is to listen first and that to do this we read some scripture. This immediately brought up for me thoughts of Lectio Divina which I first encountered many years ago on a retreat at Worth Abbey.

Since then I had practised it from time to time but not consistently. So I thought this would be a good time to get back into regular practice. I also decided to write about my experience and then to give a simple guide to Lectio Divina for any who may not be familiar with it.

At Worth the Lectio Divina prayer group began with a short introduction after which we split into small groups of around 5-6 people. One person in the group read the short passage from scripture which had been prepared. Next came a period of silent reflection. This, I feel, was initially the hardest part. Instead of listening to a priest talk about and explain the reading in his homily we were now being asked to consider this for ourselves.

To start with we were asked to consider a word or phrase that stood out (if indeed any did). We then sort of mulled it over before the scripture passage was read for the second time by another member of our group. Then more silent reflection to consider if this had any particular meaning for us. Finally, it was read a third time and we were then invited, if we wished to share our thoughts with others.

What thoughts were going through people's minds at this time? Did they think 'I don't know enough about the scriptures', 'There are others who know more than me', 'What if I say the wrong thing', 'I've never read the bible like this', 'I'm not confident in speaking out', 'I wish I wasn't here right now', 'I don't understand this at all'? Maybe we'll never know.

What I do know, however, is that people were remarkably polite - perhaps too polite, waiting for someone else to speak first. Still eventually we got going and thoughts came out. I was particularly impressed that at one point someone said 'I do not understand this part'. I also had to admit to being puzzled over one passage. However, none of this mattered because we were not there to impress each other with our knowledge or to come up with a definitive answer to what this passage meant but to learn and discover how scripture speaks to us today. Guided by the Spirit we talked. No one said "Your opinion is wrong". We were all correct.

I came away feeling that I had learned something - how to read scripture, how to think about it, how to feel confident in talking about my opinions of it. I began to realise that we were hearing the Word of God and understanding what God was saying to us, as individuals, in that Word. As we were individuals we would hear different things at different times.

Lectio Divina is an ancient monastic practice which is usually translated as Divine or Sacred Reading and there are many good books on this subject as well as plentiful internet resources. In this article it is only possible to skim the surface of meaning and, hopefully, whet appetites for further discovery about this practice.

Guigo, the Prior of the Grande Chartreuse initiated what was known as the Ladder of Monks which divided Lectio Divina into 4 stages. However, before explanation a

note of caution is needed. This is not a mechanical scheme and the 4 stages need not occur in strict order. Indeed they may not even occur within the same time frame – they could be days or even weeks apart.

This traditional pattern is said to consist of: lectio – meditatio – oratio – contemplatio. Lectio is to read the words of scripture – a small passage is enough as we are not seeking to ‘finish a book’ – and take the words into our mind and heart. We listen to God who speaks to us.

This practice can be done alone or in a group. However, in either case it is good to read aloud because we want to slow down our reading – not rush through to the end. If we read alone it is good practice to take one book of scripture at a time and stay with it. This avoids ‘cherry picking’ – i.e. picking our favourite bits of scripture and leaving aside those we dislike or find to be too difficult. If we read as part of a group there will be some kind of schedule, but again this should be fixed for the same reason as above.

Then in meditatio we repeat the words to ourselves. We begin to chew them over – much as cows chew cud - and digest them. Perhaps we will respond in prayer (oratio) to God who has spoken these words to us. It may be that we find ourselves in a freer and more spontaneous time of adoration (contemplatio) – something that is beyond prayer. Once again to caution these are not 4 mechanical steps occurring in strict order within a set time frame. They may happen in a different order and at different times. God is constantly speaking to us but we are not always ready to listen.

It has been said by some experts on the subject that there are other stages to Lectio Divina – such as preparation and various stages of conclusion. One of the stages of conclusion is said to be ‘doing’ the Word of God or ‘living’ the Word of God.

In Lectio Divina we are not partaking in bible study. We are not seeking to understand the meaning of the passages we read except in terms of what they say to us about our own life at this particular time. We are seeking to listen to what God is saying to us through His Word and then to do something with that. Lectio Divina is always personal. If we participate in group Lectio we may want to share what God has revealed to us but because it may be deeply personal anything that is said at a time of sharing is strictly confidential. There is no discussion, no agreement, no disagreement. If God has spoken to me He has spoken to me and it is not for anyone else to comment upon in any way.

Often we find that God’s message can challenge us, often it will reveal something to us about ourselves or our situation but whatever it is we are listening to God’s voice and hearing what He has to say to us at this moment. Therefore, if we read the same passage at a different time we may discover something different. However, it will always be what God knows that we need. For me this time of lockdown has presented an opportunity to listen.

Shared random thoughts for Hope in lock-down – [With thanks to all who have shared with me] - Part two

St Francis is known as *il Poverello* – which has led many to believe that he wanted nothing and gave everything away. Here is a learning curve for Religious formation. On my arrival at the novitiate in 1948 [with 16 others] we received instruction on life in community and professing the Gospel counsels of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. This wasn't how it happened for Francis.

Listening to the Gospel at Mass one day prompted him to ask the priest to explain it to him. It was the text about letting go. Afterwards he said *this is what I long for with all my heart*. This was his priority the desire embedded in his heart – *what I long for with all my heart*. This must come first – if something is not my heart's desire it will soon pass. The heart's desire of the lover is to be with the beloved, so much so that so many other things that get in the way of this need to be set aside.

When Jesus asked James and John *can you be baptised with this baptism* - he was asking have you the courage to let go of anything keeping you from being with your heart's desire? Anyone seeking Gospel living must first experience the desire for it as *what I long for with all my heart* - falling in love, letting-go in order to be with. Simply taking a vow will never achieve this.

Having discovered where he should be he sought to *experience* being there, not just speculating about it. This was an issue only fully and enigmatically resolved when, towards the end of his life, he asked on La Verna *who are you, Lord, and who am I* and found himself with the Stigmata? He was gifted by being able to see what was there before it got distorted by the mind – keep it simple. With the emerging of mind dominance [Enlightenment] we discovered many wonderful scientific facts, belief hinged on what could be proved/demonstrated. Analysis of the parts became more important than a synthesis of the whole. The mind could make things happen – re-arrange genes and predict the outcome.

Things could only get better, education linked with science will make the world a better place. Then came the Holocaust, 9/11 the Islamic State. The optimism of Modernism was rapidly wearing thin; seeing reality solely through science, technology and reason was not the panacea. Physicality and physics alone has left us powerful but ineffective, lonely and aimless.

Market economics has reduced things into having no inherent value, only exchange value – how much can we get for this. Little wonder why Jesus drove out the buyers and sellers from the Temple. Where there is little or no room for inherent value true evaluation is not possible. This led to the Church being seen to operate in terms of crime and punishment instead of Grace and mercy. There are no heroes any more, only celebrities. It is easier to look for someone to blame or exclude because someone has to be responsible for my unhappiness. This will continue for as long as we try to cope with evil in ways other than forgiveness.

Breaking rules can be a creative source – but never as a starting point, simply breaking rules proves to be a vicious circle. Throwing paint on paper is pointless, allowing paint to express value in ways other than words is creative. We are told that it is good to express feelings – see it in many chat shows – see it, and realise there is no reality for such people other than their own feelings. Anger

abounds, but if we are to avoid simply transmitting it we need to heed the wisdom of greater minds and hearts – those not caught up with themselves as the be all and end all of life. To be an individualist rules out being a believer. Our world and our families are in safe hands with a believer.

A point of view is always a view from a point, and until we learn our *points*, where we are coming from, we will never belong to the many – how can I when I am resolved to do it my way? Only a reference point beyond me will bring my belonging: *only when I do see the real me will I then see what I do not see*. Modernism takes for granted that reality is ordered – capable of being understood. This was followed by Post-modernism – either no one is in charge or something else is; all we know is that logic and reason alone will not suffice.

Why did Priesthood become Holy Orders? Does it truly signify what is there – order, control? And this while the cross professes disorder. Christianity accepts neither perfect order nor total chaos, but a reality riddled with contradictions – a world that is the world of God. Jesus was crucified on the cross of opposites. It was claimed that reality is discerned by reason; because nature is predictable, it is controllable; whereas science is telling us there is a randomness, even chaos in true reality.

Surrendering control leaves room for mystery - we are not in charge. It is said that while physicists are becoming mystics, clergy are becoming psychologists – both trying to work out a non-rational response to tragedy and the like: *All I know is that the great truth, when we discover it, will be simple and beautiful* – Einstein. True religion tells us that that the best we can do is through metaphor and symbolism. We do not know as much as we are known; we do not make connections, but realise we are connected, we are on holy ground.

In practice the Church appears to be closer to the God of philosophy and to the God of revelation, who shocks us with choices and the freedom to engage with them. Once we accept someone else is in charge then we can accept in equal measure both tragedy and grace. We were once told that all that was needed was to perfect scientific knowledge. Education alone does not transform, and we are no longer convinced that the laws of nature are as predictable as we once believed. There is bad and good news here. Living with the unpredictable is scary – things don't always make sense. But nowhere in Scripture are we promised an ordered universe. Scripture is all about meeting God in the reality of creation – in the scandals of every day rather than through educated theory.

We prefer to have text-books which make religion a spectator sport, maintaining a level of orthodoxy and leaving little room for commitment; a preference for conformity over creative change. Darkness is creative – it creates a desire for light. This is why true faith precedes knowledge for it is our uncertainty that gives access to trust. People of faith don't need to worship an institution, but neither do they experience a need to reject it.

It is neither fight nor flight, but compassionate knowing. We tend to know things by comparison, by either/or. Wisdom holds both in balanced tension with the folly of the cross – on Calvary Christ hung between good and bad in the way of reconciliation – this way of the Spirit we cannot dogmatise but we have access through metaphor – like wind and fire. Jesus is what it means to be a fully alive human being holding everything together in a male body and female soul. Son of God and son of Adam, showing us that we are all of God and of the earth. Both are good and even better when held together in creative tension – which is salvation.

The aim of the spiritual life is to see this divine light illuminating what is real: *When that day comes the very bells on the horses will be inscribed “sacred to the Yahweh”, and the cooking pots in the house of Yahweh will be as holy as the sprinkling bowls before the altar* – Zech.14.20. Paul says the same thing differently: *One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father* – Eph.4.4. Christ is the flawless image, crucified and risen of what God is about in creation, reconciling opposites. Humanity is well described as that which is eternally crucified and simultaneously eternally risen.

When opposing energies collide within us we suffer; holding both in creative tension will bring transformation through redemptive suffering, in contrast to redemptive violence, which saves nobody. Excluding contradictions instead of forgiving them simply exacerbates the problem. This is so obvious that we can't see it! This is why John refers to sin as blindness. We are immersed in a culture that sees the far right and far left in perpetual combat, simply highlighting the shortcomings of both.

Where there is no seeking to build bridges, we build higher walls. The genius of Francis, following friar Christ, was that he never wasted time in finger-pointing, he just lived the same reality differently. It is this that brings his followers to say with amazement – *I could do that!*