

FAIRACRES CHRONICLE



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COMMUNITY NOTES

Dear Friends,

Recently three of us were fortunate enough to go to the Orthodox Church of St Nicholas the Wonderworker in Oxford, to see the relics of St Seraphim of Sarov which were visiting for the day. It was a very special experience. There was a wonderful mixture of the everyday and the numinous as people from the very elderly to the very young came forward to venerate the relics. Orthodox churches are a feast for all the senses; the colour of the icons, the flickering of candle flames, the scent of incense and the sound of prayers being chanted to Saint Seraphim. The mechanics in the garage next door, leaning on a wall as they drank tea, looked slightly bemused.



As many will know, St Seraphim (1754–1833) lived from 1777 in the Monastery of Sarov in Russia. He is one of the most beloved of Orthodox saints. He is well known for two particular sayings. The first concerns the aim of the Christian life:

The true aim of our Christian life consists in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ's sake, they are only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God.

This puts our religious obligations into context. Our prayers, our devotions, and our almsgiving are all in the service of our relationship to God, and are to do with love rather than duty. It was moving to see the love expressed for St Seraphim among those coming to visit his relics, and the expressions on the faces of those who were there. For many it seemed they were visiting a friend. Certainly for me it was something more than mere curiosity which drew me; here was someone who has been a guide and inspiration for me over the years, and in the presence of the relics I felt near not just to a very holy person, but also to the Lord to whom he had given his heart.

Maybe even more significantly for we who live in the twenty-first century is the other well-known quote:

Acquire peace in your heart and thousands around you will be saved.

Peace is a quality in very short supply in our time, and true peace is a great gift. St Seraphim himself foretold the Russian Revolution and the suffering of the Russian people, and knew deep suffering himself. But he spoke of peace, and his favourite greeting for those who visited him was ‘my Joy’.

This peace of heart is not the false peace of the person who is shut away from all possible disturbance and distraction; or the superficial peace of someone who does not know the realities of our world. It is the hard-won peace of the person who has sought God in prayer and life and been willing to face their own inner shadows and brokenness and bring them to God for healing. It is the peace that comes as a result of a life lived for God, through all circumstances, good and bad. The results are transformative in ways that we cannot even begin to understand.

Many of those of us who pray, whether as religious, priests or lay people, can find ourselves wondering whether our prayer is making any difference; would we not do better serving those in need during those times that we spend sitting silently before God? Certainly I always find myself challenged by the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, describing those who served the Lord in the poor and those who did not, and had not realised it. Yes, service of others is central to our life as Christians, but it is always easy to let the more obvious results of our activities crowd out the less easily discernible results of a life of prayer.

Here at Fairacres we have to discern very carefully what ‘outside’ functions and occasions we are involved in. Enclosure is a very live topic for us; our keeping of the discipline of enclosure is very different now to what it was twenty or thirty years ago (when we

might well not have been visiting the relics at all). But the basic idea behind enclosure remains true. As our *Way of Life* puts it:

In the ordinary way, and most of the time, we expect to stay on the property where we live and where there is an area set apart for the Community's use. This enclosed area also serves as a reminder of the essential hiddenness of our life, and that within the body of Christ the Community has been called and set apart to pray. (*The Way of Life*, 'A Discipline of Place')

Our Sister Helen Columba, who died in 2015, had a great devotion both to St Seraphim and to St Thérèse of Lisieux. St Thérèse described her vocation as being love at the heart of the Church. As she puts it in her *Autobiography of a Soul*:

Then, overcome by joy, I cried, 'Jesus, my love. At last I have found my vocation. My vocation is love. In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love, and then I will be all things.'

In a series of talks given in the 1990's (extracts from which were printed in the Winter 2016 issue of *Fairacres Chronicle*) Sister Helen Columba drew the two saints together and pointed out the significance of their teaching for our time. She had discovered that many Russians had a real devotion to St Thérèse because she reminded them so much of their beloved Seraphim. Both Seraphim and Thérèse teach a way of humility and hiddenness: she through her 'Little Way' of making even the most insignificant details of life a royal road of service to God; he through his time as a hermit and his deep inner prayer. As Sister Helen Columba wrote:

Seraphim lived as a representative of the Orthodox tradition in the forests of Sarov, and Thérèse in the desert of Carmel. But as mystics I believe they trod their respective paths in the same attitude, that of humility, in knowing they were children of a God of love, and of their willing surrender to be exposed to the fire of that love.

(*Fairacres Chronicle*, Vol 49, no. 2, 31)

We find ourselves ‘set apart to pray’, as the *Way of Life* puts it. While the process of discerning the balance of prayer and activity is likely to continue throughout our lives, that inner disposition of prayer, that acquiring of the Holy Spirit, is at the heart of life.

This is certainly true for the Community. This past six months have seen some Sisters growing frailer, as well as other Sisters concerned for the needs of aging relatives, or suffering bereavements. With our smaller numbers we continue the process of discerning how best to live out our vocation as Sisters of the Love of God. In particular, much thought is going into our buildings and how best to make changes and adaptations so that they continue to serve us well and enable our life of prayer.

We are looking forward to Helen Bush becoming a Novice Oblate on 6 August, at Second Vespers of the Feast of the Transfiguration, and I personally look forward to the Associates Retreat at Llangasty from 4–8 July. By the time you read these notes we shall have returned rejoicing from the silence and beauty of that place. The retreat here at Fairacres from 19–21 October, led by Sister Susan, is already fully booked. Her theme is a phrase from our Rule, ‘Ideally, the whole of life should be made prayer.’ We have continued to have Companions’ Study Days, and are experimenting with a similar idea for Oblate Sisters. At the end of June the Convent garden will be open as part of our local neighbourhood Open Garden event (for which we hope the weather will be good!).

At the beginning of these Notes I mentioned the everyday and the numinous. At St Nicholas’s we saw the joys and constraints of the everyday life of ordinary people: young mums lifting babies up to touch the relics; old women hanging on to their sticks; a small child with hiccups and another fascinated by the candles. And shining through their devotion was the numinous, the presence of God. This was how Thérèse and Seraphim experienced the world that they found to be full of God.

Often the saints were asked for a word by those who came to see them. Here is one from St Seraphim:

You cannot be too gentle, too kind. Shun even to appear harsh in your treatment of each other. Joy, radiant joy, streams from the face of him who gives, and kindles joy in the heart of him who receives.

With prayers from all of us here at Fairacres,

SISTER CLARE-LOUISE SLG
Reverend Mother

ASSOCIATES

NEW

Companion

Sandra Verney 21 February 2018

R.I.P.

Priest Associate

The Revd Bill Kirkpatrick 5 January 2018

Companion

Barbara Calder 27 January 2018

FLG

Alison Norman 17 June 2018

APRIL FOOLS¹

Homily for the Easter Vigil

1 April 2018

ANDREW TEAL

Getting up to leave the house at around 3:30 a.m. this morning means that no one, at home at least, has pulled an April fool prank on me yet! This morning, we celebrate something amazing, where one who appeared to be creation's fool fooled the deceiver of humanity. This fool, this Jesus, also shows us how often we are still fooled, and by his own presence enables us to be fools for Christ.

When we stood here on Friday and looked upon, touched, or kissed the cross, it was its dryness, its lack of life, its depiction of naked agony that seemed unbearable. But today we know that, for all its reality and horror, the cross was not *just* an unmitigated human tragedy, but a spark, a lightning strike. Seamus Heaney's poem 'Lightenings' (*sic*) in *Squarings* puts it thus:

And lightening? One meaning of that,
Beyond the usual sense of alleviation,
Illumination, and so on, is this:

A phenomenal instant when the spirit flares
With pure exhilaration before death—
The good thief in us harking to the promise!

We see the fruit this morning of 'A phenomenal instant when the [S]pirit flares/with pure exhilaration' *in* death. The enlightening spark, even in the lap of horror, has set creation aflame with eternal life. He shows us how we have been, and still so readily are, fooled. That lightning spark from the dry cross, from the blooded and naked God enfleshed in our death, has set the whole universe aflame, making it

¹ This address, as well as most sermons preached at Fairacres Convent and Pembroke College, is available online at <https://theundistortedimage.com/>

all ‘one vast burning bush, permeated by the fire of divine power, glory,’² and love.

When we rang bells before the Gloria a few moments ago, I think we woke the birds up! They have certainly responded loudly. But somehow that noise does not disturb the deep stillness of this morning. This is creative silence; this stillness does not drown the many sounds of this morning: the wind, the birds, the bells, the chanting. They stand out and make us listen to the silence, a silence which, to quote Metropolitan Kallistos again, describes ‘not an emptiness but a fullness, not an absence but a personal presence.’³

And that divine glory, and light, and stillness, floods us so that we know that we have been fooled. It is so deeply ingrained in our human nature to be seduced by nonsense and falsehood, so that unwittingly we promote ‘fake news’ ourselves. We judge according to appearance, beauty (or rather, attractiveness), intelligence, money; and we are so seduced by power. Our processes of making judgements are corrupted by our ego, our self-justification, and our deep sense of inadequacy and worthlessness. Well, April fool! At his enthronement as Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002, Rowan Williams said: ‘... if someone came up to you in the street and whispered: “They’ve found out! Run!” nine out of ten of us would.’ Well, the Lord has found us out, and knows us, and bears in his own risen body all the wounds of our nature. And the good news, the richest truth of endless scope, is unfurled in life and power this Easter dawn.

If God—even in death—is for us, who can be against us? He did not withhold his only Son. ... Who will bring any charge against [us]? Who will separate us from the love of [God]? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? No ... I am convinced that

² Ware, ‘Through Creation to the Creator’ in *Towards an Ecology of Transfiguration*, eds. Chryssavgis & Foltz, Fordham University Press, 2013, 90.

³ Ware, ‘Gerald Palmer, *Philokalia* and the Holy Mountain’ in *The Annual Report of the Friends of Mount Athos* 1994, 27.

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God—in the risen Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Rom. 8:31ff. NRSV)

More fool us if we think otherwise; the tyranny of falsehood and fear is broken and fatally injured. A friend of mine remarked this week how utterly tiring Maundy Thursday felt, especially the stripping of the sanctuary. Not that it is a massive physical feat in itself, but it is exhausting and chilling to take away the signs of sacramental hope and leave the space as if it is a ruin.

Of course, everything is not yet sorted. We hear that Christian culture is doomed, and that the civilisation of faith is collapsed. Christians today stand far closer to the early Church than did our grandparents. Christianity began as the faith of a small minority existing in a non-Christian society. It is becoming such once more in the West, where the traditional alliance between Church and State is coming to an end. That is certainly a part of the picture, but let us not lose sight of the number of people alive today who have found in Christ crucified and raised, life, and faith, and hope. While arranging for speakers for the rest of this year at Pembroke College I noticed that there are several key leaders from Christian denominations, ordained and lay, representing 1.67 billion members. That is 24% of the world's population. I am not saying that might is right, or that numbers *prove* that it is true. I am just saying more fool us, if we think Christian faith is spent. If we include denominations not represented by their leaders at Pembroke this year, the total number is about 2.2 billion, which is about 31% of all people on the planet. That would indeed be a bit of a squash in our chapel!

So we have been fooled long enough. God has held before us judgement and salvation, and he shows us that he holds both together with love and justice even though it killed him; in stillness and agony

pinned, to hold everything to his embrace. We are April fools, because even after Good Friday and the death of hope, the Lord is here.

So with our mind in our heart, thrilled with life and love, our hearts like the empty tomb, we can be fools indeed. It is one thing to believe in God, but he wants more than that; he wants us to know him, to fall in love with him like a fool. As Archimandrite Sophrony puts it:

In the vast sea which is the life of the church, the Spirit flows like a thin pure stream, and whoever would be in this stream must lay aside human argument and cleverness. When anything of self is introduced, the waters no longer run clear, for God's supreme Wisdom and Truth are the opposite of human wisdom and argument. Such renunciation appears intolerable, insane even, to the self-willed, but those who are not afraid to 'become a fool' (cf. 1 Cor. 3:18–19) have found [Resurrection] life, and the true Wisdom [of Love].⁴

Rejoice, because you are truly God's April Fools!

The church leaders referred to in the address will be participating in a day conference at Pembroke College in November. See page opposite for details

⁴ Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *St Silouan the Athonite*, Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991, 87.

Pembroke College, Oxford

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Revd Professor Frances Young

a leading British Methodist

The Most Revd & Rt Honorable Professor Rowan
Williams

(Baron Williams of Oystermouth)

formerly Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate
of the world-wide Anglican Church.

Please contact chaplain@pmb.ox.ac.uk who will let you
know how to obtain free tickets. Prior booking is essential.

SUFFER IT TO BE SO

Feast of the Annunciation (transferred)

9 April 2018

SISTER AVIS MARY SLG

‘Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness’ (Matt. 3:15 AV). These words are familiar to many of us in the King James Version, even if we rarely hear them quite in this form any more. They were addressed by Jesus to John the Baptist, as Jesus came to be baptised by John at the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry, before his sojourn and temptations in the wilderness. John had just demurred at the idea of baptising Jesus, for he had recognised Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Christ. It was for Jesus that John was preparing the way, with the baptism of repentance: ‘He must increase; I must decrease’ (John 3:30). Yet Jesus asked John to accept him, too, for baptism: ‘Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.’

If you have followed me thus far, you might have seen something of a parallel with the story of the Annunciation of the Lord to Mary, years before. Mary is also faced with decisions and choices which appear not to be rational. She too ‘suffers it to be so’, not only for herself, but also for others affected by her decision—even for the whole world—and thus she too ‘fulfils all righteousness’. She makes the choices and submissions asked of her, as she says, ‘Let what you have said be done to me; be it unto me according to your word’ (Luke 1:38b). And so the Word of God is conceived in flesh.

Sometimes this story of Mary makes me feel rather uncomfortable. Of course, annunciations tend to have that effect, anyway; not just the big things in life, but also the smaller changes revealed to us as we go through life. These annunciations shake us out of our daily routines into something greater, even when it does not at the time feel anything like something greater! However, by ‘uncomfortable’ I am thinking of something else. God sends an Angel,

a messenger of God. In some ways this Angel is by definition an authority or power figure. Mary is frightened. The Angel then asks of Mary this fantastic thing: something so gigantic that Mary cannot fathom it. Yet Mary has faith; she does the *right* thing; she says her *fiat*, her ‘yes’, to what God asks. And then Mary is held before us by the Christian Church as an example to imitate. We are to recognise each annunciation of our own—joyful, challenging, painful—and to respond with our personal *fiat*.

Sometimes, too, even that momentous Gethsemane story, which we followed so closely in the recent days of Holy Week—the story of Jesus in the last hours of his public ministry—could strike us similarly. Jesus has to submit to higher authority, to God, and to say his ‘yes’ to God once again. That just is the way it is. Jesus does so. Yet, it is not easy to fathom; for a start, we are taken right into the theodicy question, to which there is no easy answer. Theodicy is a word taken from the French *théodicée*, a word coined from the two Greek words *θεός* (*theós* or ‘god’) and *δίκη* (*dikē* or ‘justice’) by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In 1710 this German philosopher wrote in French his work *Théodicée*, the full title of which, translated into English, is *Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*. Technically ‘theodicy’ is the attempt to vindicate God, given the problem of evil which mitigates against the existence of a God who is holy and just, and all-powerful, all-knowing and ever benevolent. ‘Why does God permit evil, suffering and death?’ is the age-old question.

Why might it be so difficult to look more closely at this saying yes to God? Is that mere cynicism? Well, if so, I think that it has a lot to do with the breakdown of a sense of authority and trust in our society. When I entered this Community forty years ago, all the professions carried respect. Over the period I have been here, each profession has been dismantled in structure; has lost authority and respect, and sometimes nearly all credibility, in a way which would have been unimaginable forty years ago. This extends to the monarchy

and political systems too. Sometimes the extent of corruption and abuse, and sheer criminality, which have been revealed, and which we hear about daily, have made us gasp in disbelief and anguish. What are we to believe? *Should* we be willing to trust any authority? What is the lesson of Auschwitz? Where can obeying authority lead?

Those of us who at times have some position of responsibility or of leadership discover the hard way that there is now little sense of automatic respect attached to such roles. In the religious life we may speak of ‘grace of office’ still, believe it still, even really experience it; yet the counterpart, the ‘grace of discipleship’, seems much harder to continue to nurture. But we cannot go back to where we were. Human authority has been shown to be flawed. The foundations have been shaken. Obedience can seem suspect and to run counter to healthy self-determination, self-esteem and self-fulfilment. Not letting people make choices and possibly make mistakes, can keep everyone trapped in unhealthy dependency. And of course human discipleship itself was already known to be flawed two thousand years ago; all those who were with Jesus forsook him and fled. We can also know betrayal and feel forsaken in our lives. So what are we to make of the obedience of Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, and of that of Jesus, the Son of God, obedient even unto death?

I find some help from the story with which I began, of Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry. We do not know exactly why the One who needed no repentance insisted upon receiving a rite which clearly signified confession and repentance. One suggestion of commentators is that Jesus was receiving his anointing with the Holy Spirit for the threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King. But again, those are roles carrying, in differing measure, authority and credibility. A different suggestion is that John’s baptism was God’s voice to Israel. In coming to be baptised, the ones who belonged to the faithful remnant of Israel responded to God’s invitation. It would, therefore, be an act of righteousness for Jesus, the One who had taken

flesh as an Israelite, simply to take his full place with the people of Israel.

Whatever the exact reason was for Jesus saying, ‘Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness’, this statement and the stories of the Annunciation and of Gethsemane all have to do with responses to vocation. Sister Rosemary spoke recently to the Oblates about one of our Fathers Founder, Father Lucius Cary SSJE. Among the sources from which she quoted was the text from a retreat address which Father Cary gave in Scotland in June 1940, in which he said:

Vocation is not a haphazard affair: not something chosen by ourselves. It is God’s Will for each separate soul. ... There is an infinite Providence of God for every human life. (We can choose an ‘occupation’, but not our vocation. For that we are called by Higher Authority). No two people have quite the same way, for each vocation develops each personality and, like golden threads, the different personalities are woven into various ropes or textures.

The responses of Mary and of Jesus are responses to vocation, to their discernment of the Providence of God for them. They suffered it to be so now; for thus it became them to fulfil all righteousness.

But what *is* the righteousness of which Jesus speaks? This is a question some of us asked ourselves recently in our Bible Prayer Group, when we were asked to think about the Beatitudes. What does it mean to ‘hunger and thirst for *righteousness*’? Those who do so are promised that ‘they will be filled’ (Matt. 5:6 NIV). And Jesus does say that to enter into the kingdom of heaven, our righteousness must even exceed that of the Pharisees, the experts in the Law (Matt. 5:20).

‘Righteousness’, or ‘justice’, is a translation of the Greek noun *δικαιοσύνη*, [*dikaïosune*], a word with layers of meaning. In a broad sense, it means the state of being as we ought to be; the condition acceptable to God, or the way to attain it; correctness of thinking, feeling and acting; integrity; virtue; purity of life; rightness. In a

narrower sense, it means justice, namely the virtue which gives to each and every person their due.

The main source of the meaning of *δικαιοσύνη* in the New Testament lies in the Hebrew thought-world of the Old Testament, relating to God's relationship of covenant with the people of Israel and the appropriate behaviour of each toward the other. The other source of meaning is its normal one in the everyday Greek of the time, namely conformity with a particular standard or law: honesty; legality, and so on.

I take it that, even if our experience of authority becomes open to question, we would still want to act uprightly and with integrity, to pursue our sense of vocation, to live and act with *δικαιοσύνη*, with righteousness or justice. But we cannot try to establish our own righteousness through good works, through what we do and achieve; these do not make us righteous. Believing that doing right makes us right was the Pharisees' mistake. God's gift of salvation in Jesus changes our hearts, which in turn changes our actions. Righteousness is a gift of grace. It comes from accepting the salvation of Christ through faith, as Jesus accepted his own mission as Messiah; as Mary, Mother of God, accepted her vocation to bear the One who would save his people, her people, as their Redeemer. Mary said her 'yes' to this divine will and purpose for humanity. That divine will and purpose were accomplished on the Cross, in that humanity which Christ assumed from his Blessed Mother.

Jesus's mission, as St Matthew shows, is to fulfil God's righteousness. Jesus proclaims not a self-righteousness of his own, but the outflowing of a life centred on submission to God. For us to be in right relationship with God is to trust in what Jesus and in what his Blessed Mother did, before us and for us; to follow them in our discipleship.

The Fellowship of the Love of God was founded in the early 1940s in Scotland. For several years Father Lucius Cary SSJE travelled through war-torn Britain to the retreat house at Walkerburn or to Edinburgh, to give the newly-formed group an annual retreat. To encourage them to develop their association with the Community, the themes of the talks were based on the vocation of SLG. A collection of passages from these retreats was later printed and distributed. The following pages reprint the leaflet in full.

NOTES FROM RETREAT ADDRESSES

LUCIUS CARY SSJE

I

VOCATION

June 1940

Keep in mind the primacy of eternal things. Temporal things are valuable only as serving eternity, ‘redeeming the time.’ That is the shining truth shown in our Blessed Lord: that the Christian life has to get through the temporal to the eternal and bring the immutable and eternal into time.

The Christian life should be a means of letting in a ray of eternal light, of furthering the eternal purpose of God. The purpose of God is that Creation should be inundated by his Love, instruments of his will. Their *raison d’etre* should be to establish complete accord with himself. We have lost this light by using our wills wrongly, and therefore part of the eternal purpose must now be to restore all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). That purpose always remains, whatever happens in temporal affairs. Happy are they who, having intelligence and will, strive to co-operate with that purpose.

There is, in his purpose, a place for every one of God’s children. That place is our *vocation*; God’s calling to the soul. The full purpose and manner of our vocation is known to Him alone and He tries by

His Holy Spirit to tell us what it is. No one is outside his purpose. He would have all come, but many will not. Yet the way from dark to light is there for all.

Vocation is not a haphazard affair, not something chosen by ourselves. It is God's Will for each separate soul. *In via, in patria*. There is an infinite Providence of God for every human life. We can choose an 'occupation,' but not our vocation. For that we are called by higher authority. No two people have quite the same way, for each vocation develops each personality and, like golden threads, the different personalities are woven into various ropes or textures. Yet God does call us into groups; for example, we are called into membership of the Church of God, the Body of Christ. Nor can temporal dissensions kill the essential life which is there. We are 'One in Christ.' It is the Christ life by which we truly live.

Listen to the prophet's words, 'This is the Way. Walk ye in it' (Is. 30:26); and the Lord's own words, 'I am the Way.' Sometimes this means no change in our familiar condition. To be a saint in society is a glorious vocation, for we are called to be 'lights in the world,' and such a one radiates the Spirit of Christ. Think of Coventry Patmore's description of a Saint, 'The saint does everything that any other decent person does, only somewhat better and with a totally different motive.'¹ It is the possession of a joyous secret which lies behind every thought, word and action.

For others, certain lines of vocation are more clearly marked. God has certain special purposes, and to fulfil them He needs certain selected lives. So we find people drawn to the life of a priest, a religious sister, an artist, a scientist. All these are forms of work, and their life work claims them to carry out the selective purpose of God. This selective purpose of God must ever be kept in mind. The fact is that there is *need* for priests and deacons, for those who will 'fill up that which is behind' in the life of the Church. For those who will

¹ Patmore, *The Rod, the Root and the Flower*, published 1885.

specialise in prayer God may in this way call us from one life to another. A priest may be called from work at home to work in foreign lands, to be a Mission priest. Nurses and teachers may be called to become nursing sisters or teaching sisters, to live an ordered life, so that they may specialise in these things. On others the mysteries of our Lord's life may have special claim: His hidden years, His hidden Prayers, His Passion, especially the hidden Passion in Gethsemane. These may be called to share that.

It is all the same life, but it has different manifestations. It is the answer from each different soul to the question: 'What does Christ mean to you?' Some are drawn by the Christ of the market-place; others by the Christ of the mountainside, or of the garden. In the popular estimate, those called to the contemplative life are often thought to be running away from the world. The truth is exactly the opposite. The contemplative has a two-fold task:

- (i) To specialise in prayer; to bring shafts of light into the whole Body of Christ; to be as eyes to that Body. It is a particular calling (and contemplation in this sense is not for all) and it is fulfilled in a life of ordered stillness, of waiting on God, carrying out each task in the light of prayer, disciplined, quiet, strong.
- (ii) To carry out the work of reparation, sharing the sufferings of Christ; 'to fill up that which is behind'; to be burden-bearers of the sins and sorrows of the world. This means deep renunciation, deep thought of the Passion, continual prayer for sinners.

They come from the ends of the earth to this work, to fulfil this particular purpose of God. And that, as we said at the beginning, *is* the meaning of vocation: to fulfil the Eternal Purpose, wherever our part in it may be, 'that God in all things may be glorified.'

II INTERCESSION

April 1941

We have often spoken of that invasion of God into human life known as the Incarnation. Now we come to see how it is worked out in the prayer life. By the Incarnation the object of life is changed and so are the *implements* of true life. In this ‘new order,’ natural abilities are disallowed except insofar as they can be sanctified and used. It is purity of heart and simplicity that prepare us to see ‘the King in His Beauty’ and that help us on the way.

Rocks, darkness, difficulty, may lie before us, but ‘I am the Way,’ says our Lord. The two states, ‘in *via*, in *patria*,’ ‘on the Way and in our homeland,’ are true for us as for the saints.

‘I am the Way.’ Look then at our Blessed Lord. There are the holy wounds, seen now in the wholeness of their meaning, in the glory of the heavenly city. There at the very heart of the Godhead are the marks which prove the significance of the now glorified manhood of the Son. There ‘he ever liveth to make intercession for us.’ He lives in glory, interceding, displaying the holy wounds, pleading, not with prayers as *we* know prayers, but with the simplicity of his presence, the witness of his Passion and his Triumph.

There is the goal, not only ultimately, but *now*. It is a goal possible even for us, because through the gift of God, the nature of man is changed. ‘Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever,’ is Man in the heart of the Godhead, and in us of ‘Christ in you the hope of glory’ (Col. 1:27) as St Paul says.

And so, since the Incarnation, all prayer has changed. It is not a case of battering at the gates of Heaven. Christ himself, the Lord of Glory, by His presence in us, leads us into Heaven. Herein lies the very meaning of the Body of Christ; we pray *through* Jesus Christ our Lord. His watchword is ours—complete acceptance of the eternal will of God. Therein lies the triumph of the Passion and of the Cross.

Intercession, is, then, no attempt to change God's purposes, but to bring ourselves into conformity with his sovereign will. Intercession is trying to bring all things into line with God's purposes and our endeavour is made through Jesus: Redeemer, Saviour, Man and God. Our Lord's human nature shows that nature in its perfection; it shows the human heart, brain, will, body and senses, all our human elements or component parts, in absolutely perfect proportion.

Our nature is distorted; our various virtues are out of proportion; our fleshly desires are uncontrolled and we need energy to restrain them; we wend a sentimental and uncertain way to God. That is why our prayer is weak, whereas our Lord's prayer is strong, direct. But he knew what was in a man and hence He could train men. For example, he converted and trained the Son of Thunder into a St John).

And He knows that despite our weakness and our very varied lives, we do ache to bring all things to the goal towards which we journey, even God himself. As we come, we realise more and more that he knows more and better than we can; and yet he desires that we should *ask* and that we should concern ourselves with all the sorrows of the world. Therefore we bring them into our heart so that they may find Jesus there.

We commit them to him, and then in him we lift them up. That is the true strength of intercession, that the needy 'should come to find Jesus keeping house for us,' that our prayer should be in and through our Lord.

'Thy Will be done,' is our prayer, *'for these things, for these people, in these things, in these people.'* This links up intercession with all our prayer, for 'Jesus keeping house' means intimately knowing the Incarnate Lord, as being in control in our life. And where shall we find the means of this knowledge? In *spiritual* (rather than 'mental') *prayer*.

All the distorted nature within us must be brought into prayer. Body, soul, spirit, each have a part to play and different elements will

predominate in different people. We need the lesser as well as the greater qualities in. prayer.

‘Worship in spirit and in truth.’ Our task is to get the various parts of our being to serve the spirit, the eternal part. (Remember that however far we may have fallen, we still bear the image of God in his spirit.) The body decays, the intellect clouds, passions cool, but the spirit remains and our aim must be to cultivate the attributes nearest to spirit and yet not to neglect the others. So we try to grow in prayer and we shall pray best according to the proportions of our own life.

Think how Holy Wisdom Incarnate clothed his teaching in parables. By doing kind things to simple people, he showed the Divine Compassion. He approached them each and all on their own level. So it is with us. We hear the old simple stories, remember the scenes and meditate, dwelling on them till they yield up their spiritual secret, not trying to think ‘clever thoughts.’

Take the Gospels, St Mark or St John, or our Lord’s own prayer-book, the Psalms, for meditation. The material is ready at hand: we take it and make our own picture. In the next stage, the picture gives place to light; the spirit overrules the mind. Thinking gives place to the activity of spirit and the prayer becomes wordless, or almost so. Words are, after all, only of use to ourselves. Our Lord’s use of the Psalms helped others; however, his real prayer lay not in words, but in being there in conformity to God’s Will, and this point leads us back again to intercession; for intercession must be backed up by the whole life.

The prayer of the righteous man availed because he was in line with God. ‘In Thy light shall we see light.’ Prayer therefore depends on our oneness, our essential integrity.

Our conversation with God will change according as we are knit up into the oneness of prayer. The earlier activity leading to action will pass to quieter intercession, and then again we shall gain a viewpoint from which we shall see things in their wholeness. Interceding prayer will become marked by deeper quiet and intensity. We shall be led to the Cross, with the arms extended and upheld, and beyond it to those

arms still upheld in Heaven, to our Mediator, Christ Jesus, and we shall find our way into line with him.

That is Intercession, very simple, very comprehensive: ‘Look, Father, look on His anointed face, and only look on us as found in Him.’

III CONTEMPLATION

June 1942

In thinking of our Fellowship and SLG, we see how the spirit of both is one, even though the circumstances are different. We may now come to that part of their life and ours which we call contemplation. How can we define contemplation?

In *The Dark Night*, St John of the Cross defines it thus: ‘A secret peaceful loving infusion of God which, if absorbed, kindles the soul in the spirit of love.’

Contemplation at its purest is the privilege of the saints in glory. That is far beyond our present scope, yet the preparation for it is here and now by recognition of the indwelling Christ in our souls, and gradually developing the power of that life within.

Here and now.

For the Christian it is not so much an initiation as a development of the Christ-life within, so that we live out his life in earthly conditions. This doctrine shines through St John’s Gospel and St Paul’s Epistles. Though over-clouded by the world, this truth is always reappearing; witness the Berule Carmelites, and the teaching of the great Fr Benson in our own day. The central doctrine of them all is ‘Christ in us, the hope of glory.’

‘The hope of glory’—the life eternal. Through St John in his Gospel our Lord tells us what that life eternal really is. ‘This is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent’ (John 17:3). Knowledge of God—that is life eternal. Knowledge of Christ: so that the Almighty is now within reach of our scrutiny. We may see through him to the depths beyond. Therefore,

spiritual contemplation is really a ‘looking through,’ It is a prayer in stillness. It is attentive prayer, through which the soul receives divine light. God is there beforehand and he is perceived by the soul which is steeped in grace, lives in grace, and has received such supernatural grace as it may please the Holy Spirit to bestow.

The SLG way of life is a preparation for this vision, for it develops that disposition to seek the Love of God in that way. It is, as it were, a sensitive plate on which God may print his Image.

This knowledge of which we speak is intuitive knowledge rather than knowledge acquired by the reason. It is only gained by grace and by practice (not by reading about it); and practice involves perseverance, loyalty to our faith, simplicity, a deep intimate experience of the revelation of God in Christ, a ‘growing-up into Christ,’ as St John and St Paul teach us, as we hear in such passages as

That ye being rooted and grounded in love may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height; and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:17–19)

And again,

Till we all come in the unity of the Faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:13)

This knowledge is gained by gazing at the Christ of the Mysteries, and by a faithful fulfilment of the Divine Will in all the conduct of daily life.

The contemplative soul is, therefore, God-conscious through Christ, realising that the revelation of God in Christ *is* eternal life. Even in secular conditions this contemplation is attainable in some degree. The ground is prepared by recognition of Christ within the soul, and by living one’s ordinary life in Christ, through faithfulness in Holy Communion and prayer. Given such preparation, the divine ‘infusion’

becomes possible. We do not often know it or feel it, but the experience is bound to lead to deeper humility and perseverance if it is true experience. It braces the soul to accept difficulties and pain, for it means that the soul is travelling in the way of Christ.

The Object of Spiritual Contemplation.

Our Blessed Lord leads us to the eternal beauty and reality of God. This is in itself beyond our natural range, but the Incarnation brings it within our reach. 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father' (John 14:9). Here then is the medium through which some light of the Divine glory will come, if we gaze upon it. That 'gaze' means keeping the machinery of the mind quiet, so that we look with our inmost soul, the gaze of the innermost spirit.

In patria, in our heavenly homeland, where we see him face to face as he is. *In via*, on this life's journey Godward, where we see him through the medium of the Incarnation, as he appeared in our flesh. All this is solely the gift of God to the soul prepared for it.

In patria, here is pure contemplation; *in via*, here is the sacred humanity of Christ, the way through which the divine light comes, and on which alone we can travel to our goal. Therefore any act or mystery of the Incarnate Lord is the object of spiritual contemplation, because the soul may get through by means of it and the divine light in turn may come through it.

To gaze at the beauty of nature may be suggestive, but it does not convey spiritual communication. To gaze on Christ is to gaze on the divine veil, hiding the glory of eternal life, eternal love, eternal beauty. Stillness is the condition under which that light and love and beauty can penetrate through, according to the purity and receptivity of the soul.

This is the reason for the discipline and silence of SLG. They are appointed to make the right conditions for that life of the spirit which invites the infusion of divine light, not only into the individual soul, but into the Body of Christ.

Look again at St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, especially Ephesians 4:10. Christ ascended 'that He might fill *all things*.' The inflowing of divine light is intended for *all* who are in Christ. He gives different functions to different people, 'for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.' There is the picture of the whole truth and we all together come to it. That which issues from that true growth is the glorious Church of the faithful.

Some have great work to do in that growth, but even humble, simple people may help. All may make their contribution to the mystical Body of Christ made perfect. All that is needed is utter simplicity, utter sincerity and loyalty to make ready for the Lord; and then maybe, in such measure as he wills, he will infuse into his Church, his life, himself, through us: 'a secret, peaceful, loving infusion.'

GENTLENESS

A Virtue We Most Desperately Need Now

JON M. SWEENEY

Our Present Condition

A few years ago, I wrote a book about Francis of Assisi in which there was a chapter on gentleness¹. Gentleness was one of six themes from St Francis's life that I highlighted as part of what I called his 'spiritual genius.' By gentleness, I meant much more than mindfulness. I wanted to state this in particular, because of how popular mindfulness has become, and how disembodied I know the practice of mindfulness can sometimes be.

¹ Jon M. Sweeney, *When Saint Francis Saved the Church: How a Converted Medieval Troubadour Created a Spiritual Vision for the Ages* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2014).

Since writing that book, I have been giving retreats and talks to groups about these topics. As a result, people tell me that they want to explore gentleness more; they want to understand it. They feel a sort of urgency about gentleness, in a way they do not seem to about any of the other themes in St Francis's charism.

There is also a sense of lament among people I talk with. They seem to feel that this quality in Francis is something the world has lost. I have not lived long enough to know if we have lost it, so do not feel that I have that kind of perspective. But I do know that I see the need for gentleness wherever I go, and increasingly so. I experience the need for gentleness most days when I ride my bicycle around town. Or when I am behind the wheel of a car. Just today a car sped past me and my six-year-old as we rode our tandem to school. There was nothing gentle about how that driver moved past us; I imagine she was late for work.

Another morning recently, when I was behind the wheel of our car, I guess that I entered a roundabout near my house too close to another vehicle, because the driver of that car was immediately incensed with me. He honked, he screamed, he gesticulated. After thirty seconds of viewing this in my rear-view mirror, I saw the driver rapidly speed up and pass me, almost hitting a pedestrian in the process. He was so incredibly furious with me. It was frightening. I was actually on my way to give a talk about gentleness, when that happened.

I also see the need for gentleness whenever I am with children, especially watching boys and girls in the playground. Watching kids makes me wonder: how much of our aggression is in our genes? Are some of us born to be aggressive, and others less so? Perhaps we are simply made to jostle with each other, to elbow each other, to strive constantly with and against each other? I imagine that humans and pre-humans did a lot of that, many thousands of years ago. Perhaps today, there are some aspects of our lives that are built upon those

behaviours, those ingrained understandings of what life is about. My answer to my own question is, ‘I hope not’.

I know that I, too, need more gentleness in my life. I know this is true whenever my parenting turns into yelling, or when a reasonable disagreement with my wife turns into moments of unkindness. Both of those things happen more often than they should.

A Short, True Story: Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh

The year was 1966. Thich Nhat Hanh was not yet a famous Buddhist teacher of meditation and mindfulness. He was simply a young Buddhist monk, an expatriate from Vietnam, exiled by the Communist government for speaking out against humanitarian abuses. He was visiting America, contemplative monasteries in particular, meeting fellow monks.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk in Kentucky, had been famous for years, ever since his 1948 autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, had been a bestseller. Since that time he had grown accustomed to interesting religious, literary, and politically-minded people coming to his monastery to see him. Wendell Berry and Denise Levertov had been there. Jacques Maritain had come, more than once. Evelyn Waugh, who could not have been more different from Merton, enjoyed an afternoon at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Even Joan Baez visited; they had a picnic and she danced.

When they first met, the middle-aged Merton asked the young Nhat Hanh what he had learned in his first years in the monastery. The Vietnamese monk paused to consider the question, thoughtfully, quietly. Merton sat there expecting some profound insight of Buddhist philosophy or spirituality; he was reading a lot of books about the religions of the East at that time. He was looking forward to writing a preface for Nhat Hanh’s new book. After their visit, Merton would plead with the younger monk to send him books—any books—on Buddhism, in English or in French.

When Thich Nhat Hanh answered Merton, the answer could not have been further from what the Trappist had expected. The elder monk was shocked by the simplicity and practicality of the younger man's response:

'To open and close doors quietly.'

The teaching in that statement was that one cannot learn much of anything that a monastery has to teach (philosophy, theology, singing in choir, mysticism) unless one first learns to be quiet. We have to settle down and learn to pay attention to the impact we have on the world around us. More recently, Thich Nhat Hanh has said:

My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand.

Yes. So, I ask myself, what doors do I need to learn to open or close more quietly?

A Real Example: Francis of Assisi

St Francis of Assisi used to tell his brother friars:

As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your hearts. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness, and harmony through your gentleness. For we have been called to this: to heal the wounded, bind up the broken, and recall the erring. In fact, many who seem to us to be members of the devil will yet be disciples of Christ.

In other words, gentleness was the foundation of a friar's calling.

Eight hundred years ago, this little man from Assisi in central Italy, was saving the Church from its corruption, clericalism, irrelevance, and insincerity by waking them up to a renewed focus on the Gospel. I call him a 'little man' not to be cute or quaint but because he was a small person (about 5-foot-nothing), and because he went to great lengths in his life to make himself 'little.' When leaders were supposed to sit in chairs and rule, he sat on the floor and

listened. When leaders rode horses, he insisted on walking. When he was offered a place of honour, he would refuse it. He wanted to be quite deliberately small and insignificant. That is why he called himself and his spiritual brothers, 'Friars Minor' which means Little Brothers. Small guys.

Those ways of being small and insignificant are not exactly what his parents taught him to be or to become. They are not what any of our parents have taught us, are they? No. We are supposed to make ourselves great, confident, and successful. This is just one way. Francis lived a counter-cultural approach to life that resonates today and which gives meaning to many other ways.

He is the world's most popular saint. He has held that position for a long time. And of course, he is also a primary inspiration to the new Pope, who has told us that, while still in the conclave that elected him, he realised that he had to take the name Francis, so important were the challenges ahead of him and the Church, and so specific were the remedies associated with Francis of Assisi's spirituality.

All of that said, Francis of Assisi is too easily misunderstood. To meet the real Francis we have to wipe clean the slate of our cultural and religious imagination and forget half-formed legends. The imaginary Francis is one of the most famous fictional characters in history. We need to forget what we may have seen and learned in Sunday school—saccharine pictures and stories that keep us from seeing the real man. Further hindering us is the fact that we often *prefer* those too-sweet images. Who would not enjoy sitting in a quiet garden among the flowers, birds in song, with a statue of Francis nearby? He is serene and calming—especially in cement. Saints are always easier to handle than human beings; they do what we expect of them. That is why Dorothy Day said making her a saint would be an easy way to dismiss her. 'Don't make me a saint!' she said.

The saintly images of Francis are ones we can easily imagine inviting to tea. A statue would sit quietly and smile. A saint might tuck a napkin in his lap and listen to the lovely songs the birds are

singing outside. Perhaps he would even interpret them for us, since he seems to understand their language. But gentleness is not about being sweet or still. If you invited the real Francis to tea he would probably insist on standing by the road to beg his bread from passers-by before joining you inside. His clothes would be ragged and dirty since he had little concern for presentation. Your neighbours would stare.

We need to see Francis for who he really was; we should not be satisfied with a fake or phantom. That would be similar to Franz Kafka's experience in 1911 when he travelled from Prague to Paris in order to visit the Louvre. He queued up to visit not Leonardo's painting, *Mona Lisa*, but the blank space on the wall where it usually hung, for it had been stolen a week earlier! Kafka (like thousands of people that year) went to the Louvre to see the legacy of the painting rather than the real thing. Let us not go to meet the legacy; the real Francis is far more compelling and important.

Francis's life and spirituality teach us many things, but none, I think, is more important than his simple gentleness, or careful-ness. 'Care' best expresses how the almost Buddhist attitude his attitude of gentle attention to things, not just to people and creatures. You have to slow down if you want to be caring. Francis was careful with human beings, but his practice went beyond people.

His reputation as the 'environmental saint' is well deserved, based upon a hundred stories from his life; but it is also a source of misunderstanding. We need to forget what we thought we knew about him if we want to see him clearly. He is the patron saint of animals, of environmentalists, even of the Cub Scouts. There are great stories about him in which he shows remarkable concern for and tending for creatures and parts of Creation. There is no question that Francis was connected to the physical world in ways that saints who lived before him would have found strange, probably shocking, and maybe even heretical; and ways that make him quite different from most of us, too. But Francis was not a lover of *nature*.

To explain or understand his care and affection for creatures in such general terms is to misunderstand how he was able to do what he did, and why his true gift was, and still is, so unusual and so desperately needed. Francis did not love *nature* because he never loved anything or anyone in the abstract. To love nature is akin to loving everyone and everything in the universe, and we know this is impossible. Francis's gift of caring was specific, which is what is most unusual about him, more than his being drawn to birds. If we generalize a particular love of this lover who excelled at loving particularly, much is lost. He shows a quiet sort of gentleness.

Early in his life as a friar, Francis cared for lepers, in part out of a sense of guilt for having previously shunned them. That is often where care begins; we respond to an injunction, or our consciences cry out. Something prompts us to do what is right, whereas in the past we have responded in some other way, or we have simply ignored the need. He continued on this path for years, doing what he knew he was supposed to do, following Christ's teachings as close to the letter as possible. But during the middle years of his converted life, we see Francis taking a greater turn toward the world in the form of gentleness. He practices being gentle—sometimes in seemingly insignificant ways—in order to train himself to care more deeply.

This is the period when he saves worms in rainstorms. This is when he gathers scraps of paper on the floor because they might contain words of Holy Scripture upon them. This is when he protects bees in winter and rescues fish from predators.

This is a gentleness that would carry through into other aspects of his life. He developed a reverence for every creature and thing he encountered. He realised that each had a mystery about it that he could not possibly know, but that he was to respect. He even regarded his own illnesses and bodily ailments as his brothers and sisters, rather than as something happening to him. If these small gestures sound silly, consider again that meeting in the 1960s between Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh. The Vietnamese monk learned nothing

more important in his first years in the monastery than opening and closing doors quietly. A man who opens and closes doors quietly is on his way to mastering the arts of caring, loving, humility, and kindness. And he will feel at one with what is around him, rather than seeking to dominate it. What doors do you need to learn to close more quietly?

Leonardo Boff put it well when he wrote, '[Francis] demonstrated with his life that, to be a saint, it is necessary to be human. And to be human, it is necessary to be sensitive and gentle.' He would ask his brothers never to cut the whole tree when cutting wood, but only to take off branches so that the tree might regenerate itself. He also instructed the brothers who cared for the community gardens to leave a strip of untouched ground surrounding the plantings of vegetables, where tall grasses and wildflowers would grow and 'proclaim the beautiful Father of all.' Francis even walked reverently over rocks. There were those who believed he was addled, but perhaps he was conscious of rediscovering something that had been lost through centuries of civilization.

Who else in the Middle Ages thought of such things? His life was one of praising Creation, protecting creatures, and touching the things around him. Even today we have trouble wrapping our minds around this attitude. No religious school teaches us to walk gingerly, plant flowers, or think about the life of the tree that you are cutting for firewood. And why would a friar imagine that such principles would be of any practical use in life?

The finely tuned spirit of a Saint Francis understands what the rest of us miss. It was his care-full-ness in little things that made him a special human being, not just the environmental saint. In no other area of his life do we see so clearly how Francis of Assisi was a man ahead of his time. His lesson of gentleness is something for *our* time.

Gentleness Today

Gentleness might be the most important and abandoned Christian virtue today. I am not talking about a form of meditation in which we just sit still. The Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism teach a

meditation of what is called ‘calm abiding’, which involves mindfulness and introspection and accepting what comes. Those are useful skills and spiritual practices, but I am talking about how we walk, drive, shop, talk, listen, eat, , how we travel, work, conduct our sexual lives and so on—of all the ways that we might be gentle on the earth. For example, ‘mindful eating’ is a fine practice, an important one to be sure; but it is not as important for the world as is mindful spending in relation to what you eat. If you buy giant containers of out of season oranges and trays of unethically slaughtered meat from the least expensive providers, it does not much matter how mindfully you decide to chew the food.

For a Christian, gentleness comes from the Beatitudes. They read like this:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:3–10)

‘Beatitude’ comes from a Latin word that means happiness. The Beatitudes are ways to true happiness; of course they are not what you might expect. Who is blessed? The poor in spirit, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, people who are peacemakers, and not the rich and powerful. Even the ‘pure in heart’ (and the phrase means what it implies, those who are simple or willingly naïve) are singled out as blessed. Do you want to sign up for this sort of blessedness,

happiness? Not many do. That is why we often call them fools. *Holy* fools.

Jesus was a holy fool, for he did not worry about the outcome or results of his teachings. Most importantly, he allowed himself to be misunderstood, and mocked. He did not defend himself when the meaning and purpose of his life was questioned by Pontius Pilate. He was willing to stand physically humiliated before crowds. In these ways alone, without any other agenda, there have been saints throughout history who have sought to imitate our foolish Lord.

Being gentle in today's climate might be a sure way to be mocked. But according to Jesus, it is also the way of life for a person of faith, and the way to happiness. The world as it is, is not bad, but we allow it to tell us who we ought to be. The Gospel is alternative, marginal, not mainstream. If we want to follow Jesus, the values of the Beatitudes are the ones that we will uphold in our lives. We will not uphold them by being 'normal' in a world that is committed to expediency.

Those who know the truth sometimes have to be foolish in order to communicate it. Saint Francis used to tell his brothers:

As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your hearts. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness, and harmony through your gentleness. For we have been called to this: to heal the wounded, bind up the broken, and recall the erring.

You may wonder how this is even possible in the world today. Has modern life—its speed, our expectations, the demands upon us—made gentleness all but impossible? Am I not gentle because I am doing what I have to do as a father, as an employee, as a citizen, as a _____ (you fill in the blank)? I do not believe that is true. I believe that gentleness is possible, and this is something which each of us must understand for ourselves.

As for me, I have begun to make some commitments toward being gentle. Will you join me in taking certain vows, making certain commitments? These are the vows that I am taking, the commitments I am making. Yours will be different. But perhaps mine may help to spur yours along. I vow

1. To commit myself daily to being truly present where I am: my place, my neighbourhood, among the people with whom I live most closely.

2. To know the creatures around me, and look out for their welfare.

3. To live on earth more lightly and less violently in the food, products, and energy I consume.

4. To draw strength and guidance from the Creation by listening more carefully to creatures of all kinds.

5. To walk and talk more quietly—to open and close doors more gently!

6. To respond to anger with gentleness, even when that means I may be perceived as ‘weak.’

7. To touch people and things more carefully, and to be aware of how my presence impacts others.

8. To listen with more careful attentiveness.

9. To pursue a daily practice of prayer, contemplation, or worship that keeps my mind clear and my heart focused on these things.

The key to understanding Matthew 5:5 (Blessed are the meek), hangs on the meaning of the Greek word *praus*, which can be translated as ‘gentle’ just as easily as ‘meek.’ Some translations render *praus* as ‘gentle’; others translate it as ‘meek’. Still others have *praus* as ‘humble’. The third beatitude could read: ‘Happy are those who lovingly defer or yield to others.’

The ancient Greeks also used *praus* to refer to a fever being reduced. And for a general ‘calming’ his troops. The best sense of

praus is illustrated by a trained lion or a tamed horse—animals that were once wild and have now learned to be gentle, to hold their natural instinct for aggressiveness in check in favour of gentleness. A horse or lion that has been tamed is not weak. The animal has learned to yield and to control its natural instincts.

Now, consider another familiar Bible passage. This is one of the two or three most memorized and recited passages in all of the New Testament. What do you think 1 Corinthians 13 is really about?

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

What if we were to view 1 Corinthians 13 through the lens of our need for gentleness? What if we were to read those famous verses about the need not for love, but for gentleness?

If I speak with the tongues of angels but am not *gentle*, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. *Gentleness* is patient. *Gentleness* is kind.

Who really knows what love means? We have spent centuries defining what love does or does not mean. We split with our partners. We betray love. We ‘fall out of’ love. We are so confused by love as the world defines it. Let us stop allowing this understanding of love to define our commitment to each other, to the earth, to God. Let us begin by being gentle.

Above all, as St Francis of Assisi showed in his life, we should assume that what we do not understand is holy, and what we cannot fully comprehend deserves our reverence.

GOD'S INDWELLING TO OVERFLOWING¹

Discipleship in the Fourth Gospel

SISTER STEPHANIE-THÉRÈSE SLG

The essence of discipleship in the Fourth Gospel is the indwelling of God in man. This is particularly expounded in the final discourse in the familiar phrases: 'Abide in me and I in you' (John 15:4); 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love' (15:9–10); 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth ... you will know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you' (John 14:15–17).

The Fourth Gospel does not present us with parables or summaries of teachings, as in the Synoptic Gospels. In John's thinking, following Jesus is not a matter of relearning a new Law summed up succinctly in one great commandment, and expounded in parables and teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount. John's commandment is singular—that you love one another as I [Jesus] have loved you—and it is a matter of being, as much as of doing. In the Fourth Gospel, John the Evangelist shows Jesus teaching not through parables but through the great I AM statements. These are not parables. They are not allegories. Jesus is not *like* a good shepherd; he *is* the Good Shepherd. Jesus is not *like* light; he *is* Light. These are qualities of being that the disciple must nurture within in order to be a true disciple. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer states in *The Cost of*

¹ A talk given at a Companions Study Day, September 2017.

Discipleship, 'Jesus summons men to follow him not as a teacher or a pattern of the good life, but as the Christ, the Son of God' (48).

One of the most powerful actions of Jesus in trying to convey the Father's meaning, the Father's love, to his followers is the foot-washing scene in John 13. Here the essence of the collaboration between God indwelling and God outpouring is displayed to us in several layers of meaning. Here we can glean some important lessons about discipleship. John sets the foot-washing scene during supper the night before the Passover. Jesus has about him his chosen band, the twelve disciples. In the course of the evening, Jesus, the Master and Rabbi of the twelve, arises, girds himself and sets to washing their feet. In a matter of moments and with a few simple gestures, he has turned the tables on the world's expectations. Humility in God is not a concept the world easily grasps or expects. Yet here, by washing his disciples' feet, Jesus shows us that divine humility expresses itself in giving service, service to those whom he created and from whom he rightly could expect service. As William Temple reminds us in *Readings in St John's Gospel*, 'We rather shrink from this revelation. We are ready, perhaps, to be humble before God; but we do not want him to be humble in His dealings with us' (209).

Jesus's action in washing the disciples' feet subverts and replaces all normal patterns of hierarchy and authority. Understandably, Peter balks. Jesus states to Peter the necessity of submission almost as a threat: 'If I do not wash you, you have no part in me' (John 13:8). Peter, further confused, overreacts and demands that his head and hands be washed as well. Here, what seemed to Peter possibly to be greater humility and homage was, according to Richard Meux Benson, writing in *The Final Passover*, only stubbornness and pride. Jesus again cuts him short, saying that he who has bathed does not need to wash. There must be moderation in our response as well as zeal. We cannot add to the foot-washing, we cannot add to the Cross. It is delusion to do so, for 'nothing can be added to what God asks of us', as Lesslie Newbigin points out in *The Light Has Come* (169).

What does Peter's reaction show us about discipleship? Already mentioned is moderation balancing zeal, but first and foremost, William Temple points out, the disciple must be ready to let God do something for him:

Our first thought must never be 'What can I do for God?' The answer to that is, Nothing. The first thought must always be 'What can God do for me?' The answer may be put in many ways; one is that He would cleanse me. When I recognize that, I am both admitting that I need to be cleansed, and acknowledging that I cannot clean myself. (210)

Discipleship is receiving God's action, surrendering to God's will, which may require a complete reordering of our own way of thinking, a complete reordering of our expectations: the Master takes on the role of a slave. According to Newbigin,

This new and strange reality must involve a sharp break with the world. There can be no smooth transition from the old to the new. There is a necessary and radical discontinuity. (176–177)

Discipleship requires change, radical change, and this kind of change requires faith and an act of trust.

Jesus asks his disciples, after he has washed their feet, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' (John 13:12). They do not, and Jesus knows that they do not. But Jesus is not asking for understanding. He is asking for faith and obedience. There cannot yet be understanding for the disciples because the Spirit has not come, and the Spirit cannot come until after Jesus departs. God can only dwell within if Jesus 'goes away'. 'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you shall follow afterwards' (John 13:36). Separation from Jesus—the physical Jesus—enables a fuller presence and greater works to be born from within the follower through the Spirit. So, discipleship is lived within the reality of 'not yet'.

In the meantime, before we ‘follow afterwards’, we live in faith and obedience, and, as displayed in the foot-washing, we live a life of humility, mutual service and love, just as Jesus showed us through his actions. We are not disqualified by lack of understanding, but by lack of faith and obedience. An act of faith is an act of acceptance, not an explanation. We cannot reduce discipleship to the level of human understanding. We cannot dictate the programme or plan the results. We subvert true discipleship with our own personal agendas, even if they be good ones.

Judas was guilty of such subversion and his presence at the foot-washing is very important. First, it shows us that hearing the Word is not enough. Judas heard the Word, was one of the chosen twelve, yet he lacked the trust to stay with the Word. Instead, he supplanted the Word with his own agenda of betrayal. He lacked understanding; yes, but they all did. What cut him out was his lack of faith and trust. Second, it is very important to realise that Jesus washed Judas’ feet, knowing Judas had already decided to betray him. Jesus’ love and commitment to those he called was ‘to the end’ (John 13:1), and did not depend on the disciples’ performance. Jesus’ love was such as to include even Judas in the foot-washing; by extension, our love, too, should reflect such inclusivity.

After the foot-washing, Jesus tells his disciples, ‘If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you’ (John 13:14–15). As Hoskyns comments in *The Fourth Gospel*,

The behaviour of the disciples of Jesus must be conditioned by His behaviour ... since final blessedness does not depend upon knowledge of the truth, but upon doing the truth. ‘If ye know these things, blessed are ye if ye do them’ (John 13:17). The Evangelist thus introduces, on the basis of the washing of the feet of the Disciples, the theme of mutual love, which is the essence of the life of the Church. (440)

And of our discipleship. Discipleship must always be related to our neighbour. Here God's indwelling love overflows. In faith and belief you encounter God when you encounter Jesus. You meet more than a signpost; you meet the way and the destination. Discipleship lies in believing this to the point of internalising that encounter so that God dwells within. This is not doctrine, or law, or elusive mystery. It lies in knowing God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit at the depths of one's being: 'You will know him [the Spirit of Truth] for he dwells with you and will be in you' (John 14:17). If this encounter has been cleansed of the world's intentions, it will not be jealously or selfishly guarded. It will be shared, as Jesus shared the Father's love with his disciples and with everyone he encountered.

Discipleship is more than following Jesus or believing in Jesus, it is a becoming of Jesus in the disciple. This does involve following and believing and imitating, but also at a much deeper level 'becoming Christ'; becoming empty in order to be filled to overflowing with God the Holy Spirit who will transform us into a son of man/ son of God. It is an internal transformation which moves outward to what the world sees so often as discipleship, that is, activity, good works. Does not Jesus warn the Pharisees about being whitewashed sepulchres? The prelude to discipleship is not whitewashing, but cleansing, cleansing ourselves from inside out. There are obvious baptismal overtones in the foot-washing. The foot-washing is not a once-for-all cleansing like the sacrament of Baptism, but, as Augustine of Hippo affirms in his *Homilies on the Gospel According to St John*, an ongoing cleansing

in respect of the human affections wherewith we move about the earth, that how great soever may be the progress we have made in the apprehending of righteousness, we should know ourselves not without sin [i.e. not without need of cleansing].

(Homily LVIII:5)

Disciples are *in* the world but not *of* the world, and their contact with the world necessitates an ongoing washing the dust off one's feet. As the cleansing is ongoing, so too is the discipleship.

Discipleship is not just loving, but becoming Love. As the Christ incarnated God's Love to the world, so too must we, through the indwelling of God the Spirit, incarnate God and manifest the Love of the Father and the Son to the world today. This indwelling is not a passive thing; it is very active. As shown in the foot-washing, it is an indwelling that prompts both receiving and giving, sacrifice and service, unifying all disciples in these mutual responsibilities.

In his book, *Discipleship*, J. Heinrich Arnold, a Bruderhof elder, captures well this witness to unity as well as the ongoing-ness of discipleship:

According to the first three Gospels, the twelve apostles were sent on mission with the words, 'Go out into all the world and make disciples of all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.' In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of another form of mission: 'May they also be one in us so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.'

This is so important for us today. Here Jesus does not put the emphasis on preaching the Gospel to win people from the world, but on unity: 'May they all be one, so that the world will believe that thou hast sent me.' In this prayer, mission consists in the unity of the disciples.

Unity costs a fight; it costs church discipline and suffering; it costs renewed forgiveness, trust, and love over and over to the same people who have hurt us. If unity is strong among us, it will shine out into the world. We do not know how, but it will. (229–30)

The implications of discipleship in the Fourth Gospel are very positive for today's world. The indwelling of God in the human being and our effort to make room and to keep room for God's indwelling is a witness to commitment and stability, both of which are sorely lacking in today's Western society. We live in a world of instant results, instant pleasure, fast to acquire, easy to dispose of. In a world

of high technology, we also now expect instant answers and understanding. John the Evangelist does not witness to instant anything, but to lifelong commitment, which will bring eternal life in the future, as well as now. It will not necessarily bring instant happiness, but it will bring joy, a joy that is full (John 16:24). Discipleship will not be easy and quick to grasp. And it will cost something: trust, obedience, sacrifice, service and tribulation. However, these will not be empty actions, as is the instant and empty satisfaction that the world offers.

We cannot expect to embrace true discipleship without struggle. In Jesus' discourse after the foot-washing, he prays to the Father that his disciples not be taken out of the world, but kept from the evil one (John 17:15). God indwelling and our following Jesus do not take us out of the world or away from its problems. The prayer to keep disciples from the evil one certainly implies that we should expect trials and tribulations, such as Jesus experienced in his Passion, if we, too, manifest God's love to this same world. 'In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). This is discipleship: faith and trust in what God has done and is doing, and desire to participate in that action. It is making space within you for God to dwell to overflowing, so that you, too, can share that love with others as Jesus did. God becomes human—humans become God. You cannot give from empty coffers!

IN MEMORIAM

REVEREND BILL KIRKPATRICK

(1927–2018)

Father Bill, a Priest Associate since 1974, died on 4 January 2018. Father Hugh Valentine gave a tribute at the Requiem Mass at St Cuthbert's Philbeach Gardens, Earl's Court, and has kindly allowed us to print it here. Bill's ashes are buried in the SLG plot at Rose Hill Cemetery, Oxford.

We attend funerals out of love or duty. And tributes to dead clergy often major on outward achievement: a succession of church roles, the gathering of longer ecclesiastical titles and honorifics. I believe most of us are here because of love.

Bill chose a path that took him far away from the church's rewards radar. I first met him as the result of a deception of sorts. I was on the Southwark Ordination Course and was required to find a placement. We were to choose a setting quite different to one we might feel naturally at ease in, and the Principal thought I should find some evangelical parish to spend time with. I managed to make the case that I had had extensive experience of the evangelical approach to Christian faith, though I concealed the fact that it had been painfully negative and had left me hurt and angry.

I was then working as a social worker in Bermondsey and was set on the path of wanting to become a worker-priest. I reported having heard of Bill Kirkpatrick and his particular approach to that vocation. The proposal was approved, and I dropped Bill a letter. He suggested a preliminary meeting before saying yes. I arrived at his Earl's Court basement flat to encounter—as many of you will have encountered—a man who was unusually 'present' without in any way being intimidating; who seemed to inhabit an interior silence without in any way being inaccessible; who approached listening as something significantly more than keeping silent whilst another spoke.

That was around 1987. It was a time of fear amongst gay men, and in society at large, about AIDS. Attitudes in the Church, especially towards gay clergy, hardened with a dreadful debate in Synod that year. Against this spreading chill, Bill kept his nerve and his courage and helped many of us survive those dark days. His own discipline meant that he was not himself paralysed by these things. He would explain that he took them to God in prayer—the kind of traditional formulation that can so easily be a religious cliché and an evasion, but never was so with him.

Bill had experienced trauma in his early years. He described himself as a ‘love-child’ but realised that his conception probably had little to do with love and soon led to his abandonment. As he put it: ‘within a month of my birth, I was shipped off to a private orphanage’.

Insecurities in childhood’s crucially developmental years exact a high price. And growing up gay in a straight world, likewise. Bill’s early experiences were ones which left him with the messages that he did not fully belong, was not fully wanted, was not really approved of. What he managed to achieve in the light of those messages has been astonishing. His life provides an infinitely more compelling reading of Christ’s Gospel than any barrow-load of academic theology or traditional preaching or church pronouncements.

Bill brought himself, without adornment, to the energy the Church calls grace and the results have been significant and beautiful. In the most straightforward of ways, he contemplated what the gospels say about the elusive Nazarene and he sought to live that out in the costly way of giving himself to others.

‘Listening’ and ‘being there’ go a good way towards summing up Bill’s life and work, but only if heard beyond the language of cliché. The transformation of our psychic wounds into the unselfconscious business of loving and healing others is indeed the work of grace. And in this Bill’s life and witness has been, and remains, of tremendous significance. The aspect of his work for the Gospel which meant and means so much to me is the way he modelled priestly work beyond the walls of the institution.

To welcome outsiders into church is one thing (and a valuable and necessary thing to be sure); to *be* the Church beyond those walls and amongst those not valued by the Church (however much that is disguised by Christian double-speak) is another. And Bill did it.

I mentioned childhood trauma and Bill’s experience of it. And we, his friends—his family of friends—have also experienced a kind of trauma over this past decade in seeing all that has so wonderfully and

powerfully epitomised this beautiful man taken away by a disease of the mind. This feels like a long delayed funeral.

It is a very old problem for Christian people that the extent of human suffering challenges claims about God; but mostly, we find a way of making some residual sense of these conflicting realities. Yet there are times when it becomes very hard indeed, and Bill's last decade has caused many of us distress and sorrow. But, that has now ended. What remains is the shining example of someone who, from his own experience of being wounded, helped heal others.

Bill: how we loved you, how we have missed you, and miss you. Against the distressing messages you heard as a young man, hear this: you have been a truly fine priest and an exemplary human being.

HUGH VALENTINE

29 January 2018

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

LUCIUS CARY SSJE was Director and Chaplain General of the Sisters of the Love of God from 1916 to 1954.

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BOOKS

Divine Remaking: St Bonaventure and the Gospel of Luke, Douglas Dales, James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 2017, \$65 ISBN: 9780227176535.

The friendship between Saint Thomas Aquinas and his Franciscan contemporary, Saint Bonaventure was one of Biblical magnitude; some even have compared them to David and Jonathan. G. K. Chesterton, in his biography of St Thomas Aquinas, says, ‘Bonaventure was not likely to think that Thomas was lacking in the love of God, and certainly he was never lacking in love for Bonaventure.’ The story of these two Doctors composing competing offices of Corpus Christi for the Pope, which concludes with Bonaventure tearing up his own attempt upon hearing Thomas’s offering being read aloud, may not be true, but the succeeding centuries have seen Thomas take pre-eminence over Bonaventure as the Common Doctor of the Catholic Church. However, interest in Bonaventure has seen a resurgence in recent years. Cardinal Ratzinger’s doctoral thesis was on Bonaventure’s approach to history, and his best-selling *Jesus of Nazareth* is indebted to Bonaventure’s reading of the Gospel, especially the chapter on the Transfiguration.

The Revd Douglas Dales’s *Divine Remaking: St Bonaventure and the Gospel of Luke* is a wonderful introduction to Bonaventure’s Commentary on the Third Gospel. Interestingly, St Thomas never wrote a commentary on Luke: it is conspicuous by its absence, like a missing stone from an otherwise impressive edifice. Hence Bonaventure provides an unparalleled work in three volumes, in a total of 800 pages. Dales provides us with a helpful and manageable digest which shows us why Bonaventure’s understanding of Scripture and Revelation are so necessary in the twenty-first century.

Bonaventure wrote his commentary as a resource for Franciscan preachers. He was faced with problems similar to those of today: did Saint Francis and his movement usher in a new age or mark a rupture in Church history, or could his radical Gospel poverty be seen through

a hermeneutic of continuity? Dales lets the answers to these questions unfold through his book. His gradual unveiling of the meaning of ‘divine remaking’ recalls Bonaventure’s image of the stone rolling away from the tomb of Christ’s sepulchre as a metaphor for the unveiling of Gospel truth through biblical exegesis.

Saint Bonaventure was a man of prayer, who humbly followed Francis’ injunction that a friar should pray more than study. As a consequence, Bonaventure was a man of deep learning and profounder prayer. Hence, Bonaventure’s commentaries on the Sacred Scripture make excellent material for meditation. Dales, once again, puts Bonaventure’s meditations—and our own—within the context of the history of *lectio divina*. He devotes an entire chapter to this ancient practice, which began in the Benedictine monasteries and which now plays a part in the spiritual lives of many clergy, religious, and laity. What brought *lectio divina* out from the cloisters and into our homes was the preaching of the Friars, guided by Bonaventure. What the Benedictines had stored up for centuries in the great secluded houses of prayer, St Francis scattered throughout the world.

‘The whole of Sacred Scripture teaches these three truths, namely, the eternal generation and incarnation of Christ, the pattern of human life, and the union of the soul with God,’ wrote St Bonaventure. He was not a fundamentalist who demanded Christ’s parables be restricted to a single interpretation. At the same time, the Gospels are reliable historical texts, relating a literal truth. What seem to be contradictions between Gospels (did six or eight days elapse between Peter’s confession and the Transfiguration?), Bonaventure reconciles through his reflections. Dales supplements these with his own scholarly speculation, e.g. the sudden naming of the Pharisee, Simon, in the story of the repentant woman might indicate that the story was reported to St Luke first-hand by Simon himself. In the story of the healing of the leper in Luke, Chapter 5, Bonaventure notes that Christ could have healed the leper by word alone, but he deliberately breaks boundaries by touching him too, to show that the Word has been made

flesh. In his writing Dales breaks the boundaries of eight centuries to make Bonaventure appear as a man of flesh, by quoting his words in so life-giving and refreshing a way.

As a Conventual Franciscan postulant, I am indebted to this book. In spite of Bonaventure being one of the luminaries of the Order, I knew very little about him when I joined. Dales supplies the reader with a lively fleshed-out biography peppered with anecdotes, and also sets him in the context of his time. The reader is entertained by the petty squabbles of the universities; enthralled by the great Schoolmen who paved the way for Bonaventure; and edified by the salutary influence that the Saint had achieved in his Order and the Church by the time he died. Now, not only do I know who Bonaventure was and for what he stood, I also have acquired a small treasury of beautiful quotes from the saint which are never far from my lips. For these advantages alone, I would recommend this book to the ordinary reader who has not yet encountered Bonaventure.

Dales also acknowledges, which I as a Conventual Franciscan appreciate, that Bonaventure was a man who took the Franciscan Order in a direction which upset many, and which ‘clouded his memory among some later Franciscans of the more spiritual persuasion.’ The ‘Spiritual’ view of Franciscan history is often the most-cited, and it is refreshing and reassuring that the author presumes on the good faith of the Conventual tradition which is Bonaventure’s. Although sympathetic to other expressions of Francis’ charism, Dales sees the Conventual charism as a much-needed systematisation which merited Bonaventure the title of Second Founder of the Order.

Divine Remaking is like the old souvenir Photographic Record of Assisi’s Basilica of Saint Francis which stands near this book on my bookshelf: a series of snapshots which give a glimpse of an enthralling achievement of the medieval mind. It is a must-have for every Franciscan library and for anyone with an interest in Franciscan life and history.

PETER FLYNN

Becoming Friends of Time, Disability, Timefullness and Gentle Discipleship, John Swinton, SCM Press, 2017, £19.99.

ISBN: 9780334055570

Time: how much of our lives are ruled by the clock? How often do we hear ourselves saying, ‘I do not have the time to’ ... visit a friend in hospital; to stop and respond to the homeless person sitting on the park bench; to sit peacefully in the garden and wonder at the beauty of the changing seasons; to talk prayerfully with God; to waste time with the other? What do we understand by ‘time’, what it is and by whom and for whom has it been created? Is there more to time than its economic value? What can it mean to speak of becoming a friend of time, and of timefullness?

In a carefully crafted book John Swinton, using all his skills as a teacher, graciously unfolds this reflection on time by leading us through complex ideas, prejudices and assumptions. He invites us to a deeper awareness of the fullness of our lives if lived in the ‘space’ of God’s time. The fruit of a lifetime of encounter, faithful discipleship and academic research, Swinton dares to share with us in this book his discovery of the ‘deep connection between the experience of brain damage and the redemptive power of God’s time.’ He is convinced that ‘the love of God is something we live into, not something we reflect upon ... it is the subject of our lives, not life’s object.’ Working with the underlying presumption that thinking about God (theology) is a way of enabling human beings to love God and one another more fully, and that the experience of God’s love precedes our understanding of it, he brings key theological ideas into critical conversation with the human experience of disability. The book therefore is a demanding read, asking that we engage with the philosophy and theology of time and the impact of such thought on our lives, as well as grasping a current understanding of neurology.

The real incidence and experience of people’s lives, whether living with learning disabilities, dementia, or acquired brain damage, are brought to us as guides into a fuller understanding of the nature and

characteristics of the love of God and its reflection in the way we live faithfully together in communities of ‘genuine belonging’. These lives, calculated by mainstream society as useless and a burden, displace and challenge our basic assumptions about who we are, the meaning and purpose of our lives and the way we live our lives. Swinton takes us into the complex and emotionally fraught terrain of memory, identity and what he calls the ‘horror’ of time. This is witnessed in the experiences of dementia and acquired brain damage which often involve the loss of a past lived history, a ‘living death’. Yet if we dare to become a guest in the heart of the seeming stranger, to be present to their reality today, to be ‘gently and slowly’ in communion with them in this present moment, we too might begin to experience a life that is lived in the image and likeness of God: a life lived that is, as Swinton strikingly describes it, ‘sutured through the heart’. Our unlikely teachers lead us out into the desert so that we might discover new depths in our relationship with God (cf. p. 122, reflecting on Dr Frances Young’s experience of living with a disabled son) and our participation in the Body of Christ and the redeeming of time.

Swinton writes ardently from within the Christian tradition, asking us to reimagine our discipleship and to live out more radically our vocation in the world. The primary marker of this discipleship is our ability to love and is characterized by relational trust; we are called to Jesus, not to knowledge about Jesus. We are called to be with one another. This is a book that every Christian community should take the time to read together. It will turn upside down hidden assumptions and usher fresh life into our shared living and worship as followers of Christ. It is a book for our time. SISTER KATHARINE SSC

All the Fullness of God: the Christ of Colossians, Bonnie Bowman Thurston, Cascade Books 2017, £17.00. ISBN: 9781532615412.

This is a book written it for ‘the sheer joy of it’ (vii), for love of Colossians and ‘what and whom it reveals’ (vii). After more than

twenty years of being intrigued by Colossians, Bonnie Thurston knew that she had to write it. This she has done in full personal integrity as a biblical scholar committed to living in the light of her theological understanding.

All the Fullness of God is a seriously theological book, highly and helpfully organized, yet written with lightness of touch. The language is informal, largely non-technical, the Greek text referred to only when necessary to make meaning clear. The result is a truly accessible scholarly book on Colossians. It is significant that the book is divided into two parts: Part One designed to interpret the text, not verse by verse, but concentrating on key passages; Part Two designed to encourage reflection on the Christ of Colossians, highlighting its contemporary relevance. In Part One Thurston carefully sets the scene: a cosmopolitan city in Asia Minor or present-day Turkey, to whose church the author was writing, sight unseen. Her interpretation of the text comes quickly to the Christ Hymn (1:15–20), the theological focal point of the letter. The Hymn eloquently celebrates the cosmic and eternal dimensions of the risen Christ, correcting the inadequate interpretation of Christ to which the Colossians have been exposed. As Christ is ‘the image [ikon] of the invisible God’ (1:15), so those baptised into the life of Christ are called to live as images of God.

Thurston is well aware that many contemporary readers find Paul, or the author of the letter, problematic. They may reject him as a misogynist, or condemn his acceptance of slavery, or simply dislike his temperament. With such readers in mind, she notes the many passages in Colossians which warmly refer to women as friends, or as highly valued helpers. With respect to slavery, she points to the fact that slavery was widely accepted at the time, Jesus himself accepting it. As for Paul’s temperament, she underlines his obvious pastoral care and concern for the Colossians, his capacity for friendship, and his compassion. Overall, his purpose in writing the letter to the

Colossians was to teach and preach Christ, to enable them to mature spiritually as Christians.

Thurston is thoroughly familiar with the scholarly debate concerning the authorship of Colossians, whether Paul himself wrote the letter, or someone close to him. For the purpose of this book, she chooses to set the question aside. Even so, she does not hesitate to tell us when some word or expression is 'Pauline.' There are hints enough that she has come to the conclusion that Paul was very likely the author. Typically Pauline is the use of metaphor to express meaning in familiar language. Thus, Colossian Christians are urged to 'put off' their old ways and to 'put on' new ways (3:9–14). For the Colossian Christians this ethical advice not only drew upon their everyday experience of dressing but also related to their experience of Baptism. They had all emerged from the baptismal water to 'put on' white robes symbolizing their new life in Christ, which they shared with all their fellow Christians. This Christ is the same Christ as in the Christ Hymn, 'by whom all things in heaven and earth were created' (1:16), so much more than simply personal to each of them.

In her reflection on Col 3:5–9 Thurston contributes a metaphor of her own. Given that use of a sporting metaphor is typically Pauline, she translates 3:15: 'Let the peace of Christ referee [or umpire] in your hearts' (116). The referee metaphor replaces the more usual legal metaphor, 'rule', with the greater familiarity of team sports. The 'umpire' Paul has in mind is the 'peace of Christ,' the mysterious presence of Christ at work within each Christian as motivation for action is formed.

As Thurston's examination makes clear, the spirituality of Colossians affirms divine mystery while also challenging the prevalent contemporary individualism. So to speak, individualism is the well-worn clothing that has to be shed in the ongoing process of Christian formation. This is a book to be read and pondered by those who hunger for the spiritually real thing.

MARION FRY

The Eternal Today: Journeying with the Church, in the Light of the Feasts, Archimandrite Zacharias, ed. Sister Cassiani, Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, Essex, 2017, £15.

ISBN: 9781090649156.

This is a beautifully produced illustrated companion to the Orthodox liturgical year between the first of the three Sundays before Lent up to and including the Feast of Pentecost. Each significant day is introduced by fragments from the liturgy, accompanied by short meditations and teaching by Father Zacharias, who has a remarkable ministry as a spiritual father in this country and abroad. The book is adorned by wonderful illustrations, drawn from the frescoes and other art created at this monastery founded by Father Sophrony. Thus the rich iconographic tradition of Orthodoxy is made readily and memorably available, interpreted by and illuminating the written word.

This book will be of real value to anyone on retreat, or wishing to prepare themselves for Lent, Holy Week and Eastertide, in any part of the Christian Church. It would also serve well as a gift on the occasion of Baptism, Confirmation or Marriage. It will be most useful to place into the hands of young people as a companion to worship and belief, or as a gift to those seeking to find about the Christian faith, especially in its Orthodox expression. Further companion volumes are being prepared.

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