

St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford

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As we gradually emerge from the enforced isolation to protect ourselves and our communities from the Corona Virus pandemic, it is a good time to look back and ask ourselves some searching questions. What have we really missed? What do we most long for as we regain our social freedoms? What have we most enjoyed about our strange situation of months? What have we learned about ourselves?

Deprivation tells us much about what we really value. There is of course the most profound loss experienced by those whose nearest have died from the virus: lives turned upside down in a way none could have imagined 6 months ago, now permanently marked by their loss. Many who live alone or far from loved ones would say it is genuine human contact with them which they have missed most. Skype, Zoom and Facetime, however miraculous, are a poor substitute for real social interaction, for touch and for all the nuances of genuine physical meeting and personal relationship. Certainly I can testify that no electronic meetings can compare with the great bear hug my son gave me when we were allowed “to bubble”! Others have longed for the physical freedom to explore the countryside and see the oceans, to take holidays and experience the stimulus and nourishment of new places and experiences. For some there will have been a loss of status and affirmation as public life has been curtailed, and as jobs of many kinds have been put on hold or lost. Some will actually have lost their livelihoods. Others, more frivolously, may well have missed partying or shopping – though I doubt if many of those in church today will have joined illegal raves or queues outside well known clothes shops which happened as lockdown eased. Believers of all traditions – Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians – have mourned the absence of worship together and the experience of their holy places. It was striking that the lockdown hit hardest at some of the holiest times of year for believers – Passover for Jews, Holy Week and Easter for Christians, and the Haj or pilgrimage season for Muslims. As Christians in the Catholic tradition we have been left without the physical sacraments through which God touches our humanity in a deeply social and physical way. Of course grace has not been locked down with our church

buildings; but for many of us the sacramental channels of grace have a profound importance and their absence has meant a deep sense of loss.

Plato records Socrates at his trial as saying that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” By examining our sense of loss we learn to see what is truly important to us – in Biblical terms, where our treasure is.

Humans seem innately to be seekers, people in whom there is a sense of restlessness and incompleteness. It was St. Augustine who wrote famously in his *Confessions* that God has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Him. Our own Anglican George Herbert in his great poem, *The Pulley*, evoked that longing for completion and fulfilment which nothing but God can satisfy. Having listed all the gifts that God had poured out on his children he portrayed God as saying,

Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.”

The Scriptures are uncompromising about the ultimate source of what we seek – God himself and his rule over all things which restores our lost and wandering humanity; or to use the haunting words of Fortunatus in his famous Passiontide hymn, that which offers harbour to “a ship-wrecked race”. Our readings today all reflect in some way this search.

We heard from 1 Kings of the young Solomon succeeding to the throne of Israel on the death of his famous father, David. He sounds horribly scared and inexperienced at the prospect of ruling God’s people. When God appears to him in a dream and asks what gift he would like, what he was seeking, Solomon asked for a wise and discerning heart. In Jewish tradition Wisdom was to become increasingly important – seen as part of God’s self-manifestation from the creation of the world. The so-called Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha describes Wisdom (7:25-6) as “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.” Moreover,

Wisdom in every generation “passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God...”
(7:27)

Our gospel reading from Matthew tells of several sayings of Jesus about seeking the Kingdom of God. It is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone finds and then reburies, so he can go off and sell everything in order to buy the field itself (with of course its buried treasure). Or again, it is like a fine pearl of huge value. When a merchant in fine pearls discovers it, he goes and sells everything he owns in order to buy it. Being part of the Kingdom, being a follower of Christ, is of such supreme importance that nothing less will satisfy anyone who has glimpsed it. These beautiful little stories echo gospel accounts of Christ’s calling of those who sensed something deeply attractive in his presence. For example, there was the so-called “rich young ruler” we meet in Luke’s gospel (18: 18-28). He was obviously dissatisfied with his life as a God-fearing man who kept the commandments, and sensed that there was something more if he was to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to sell all he has, give it to the poor and follow Him. The rich man went away sadly, for, in Luke’s words, “he was very rich”. By contrast almost immediately in the gospel (Luke 19: 1-10) we meet Zacchaeus, another rich man, clearly on the proceeds of his job as a chief tax-collector. He seeks in a rather simple way to satisfy his curiosity – by climbing up a tree to have a look at Jesus. As we know, he got more than satisfaction for his curiosity, far more than he had bargained for. Jesus saw him, called him down and turned his life around.

Our reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans comes from the long chapter 8, which is one of the most luminous pieces of Paul’s writing. He writes of the new life in Christ’s kingdom, life in the Spirit, given to those who have sought and found Him. Or perhaps it would be better theologically to say those who have been sought by Christ and found by Him. For indeed all our human seeking, all our dis-ease with ourselves and our lives, comes from His seeking us. As I wrote in my sermon circulated during the lockdown, when I drew on the writings of the holy anchoress, Julian of Norwich, Christ desires us and seeks us out. Paul writes of the groaning of all creation as it waits for the reality to be revealed – the glory of the whole creation set free to live the new life Christ offers and desires for us.

But until that day, as Paul writes in the verses actually read to us, in the lives of those God has called to himself, all things work together for good. This is no facile saying, no easy optimism. We know perfectly well that bad and sad things happen to us all. Our loved ones die, material things go wrong, people betray and hurt us, we become ill: the list is discouragingly long. But Paul says that God's creative and redemptive work goes on, taking the raw material of our human lives, moulding and transforming them, using the good bits and the bad bits, even the sin and suffering. For by God's grace we are destined for glory, intended to become true images of Christ so that we may be part of a large family where Christ is the first-born.

As we contemplate what we seek most, what our treasure is, let us remember above all that it is God working through Christ who seeks us, to remake us for his glory.