

Lent Readings 2020



Ash Wednesday

The real mystery of the human is that we are so convinced that we have to get somewhere, failing to realise that we are already there. We wouldn't be thinking of goals and objectives unless they were already activated in our personal consciousness. So, let's start Lent today with the Resurrection.

Without the Resurrection, Lent would be a dull, self-centred time devoted to cultivating one's own spiritual garden. We would be concerned only with giving things up that we like or doing difficult things that we think would be good for us. Maybe they would be, but motivation is everything. Many, Catholics especially, today will be having conversations about what they are 'doing for Lent' often with a humorous tone and a little bit of religious competitiveness. "If he is giving up alcohol for Lent, maybe I should as well.." Jesus' teaching on all this is clear. Don't publicise your 'good deeds' and even 'don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing'. If this sounds very complex and challenging, in fact it is ridiculously simple.

When spiritual practice is covertly run by the ego (and most things are) we unconsciously slip into thinking that progress, coming closer to God, is linked to suffering or to voluntary discomfort. It's like thinking that we have to do something unpleasant to make someone who already loves us continue loving us. We don't feel worthy. We don't trust. We hedge our bets. God must be having a good laugh at our reluctance to believe the obvious.

Like meditation, Lent isn't about spiritual leverage over God or about taking back control of our spiritual journey. As we begin Lent, let's decide, with the simplest motivation, whether we will do something or do nothing. (Her mother told the young Queen in the TV series *The Crown* that doing nothing is the most difficult thing.) The gift today is to determine to more deeply believe the gift of God's love. This is impossible until we feel that God actually *likes* us.

Let's try this Lent to shed whatever remains of our pagan, ego-coloured idea of God and so prepare for the resurrection by living in the new light of Christ. The

old gods died when devotion to them dried up. They looked powerful but, like celebrities, they feed off human attention and wither when it fails.

The true God is far more real and interesting and infinitely friendly. So, something or nothing? Simply being more faithful to our daily times of meditation and to the simplicity of the mantra combines both options. (As John Main said 'prayer is the essential ascesis of the Christian life').

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

I was recently on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. As the next forty days can be seen as a kind of interior journey to the sacred time of Easter, I thought we could begin these Lent reflections with a link to the holy places associated with the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Meditation, like a physical pilgrimage involving travel, varied companions and a combination of constant change and steady purpose, is a journey within a journey. Indeed the path of life is composed of pathways beyond measure, sometimes crossing, sometimes blocked, sometimes rapturous, at other times frustrating. Always surprising. As everything is always passing, we learn to be good pilgrims by adapting to reality, shedding the half-baked illusions with which we often try to cope with change. The first illusions to drop are about God.

Normally we imagine God as way above change, as an extra-terrestrial outside the traffic flow of human history. If God ever does come down to the human level, he travels like a powerful person with a motor-cycle escort (clergy for example), while ordinary people are pulled over to let Him pass. To disabuse us of this idea, God happened in a unique and inexplicable way through a young woman called Mary in a town of about 150 inhabitants, called Nazareth, a backwater of a backwater of a land with inhabitants always fighting with each other and occupied by a ruthless pagan power. The Jewish joke is that if a Jew was stranded on a desert island he would build two synagogues so that he could have one which he refused to go to. God was translated into the human in an all too human place. A holy land of immemorial territorial disputes.

Jesus of Nazareth was born into an artisan class. He worked with his hands. His teachings on the deepest of mysteries were couched in the language of farming and village life. He did not speak in abstract sutras trying to verbalise the subtleties of the divine. He used down to earth symbols like a treasure buried in a field or a wayward younger son who comes home with his tail between his legs. Instead of conceptualising the truth, he tried, usually unsuccessfully, to help people discover it for themselves, allowing it to emerge through their own ordinary lives. Later some people realised he was not giving an answer but that he embodied the truth. The medium was the message.

In Nazareth there is a bronze plaque on the ground of Mary's house where (believe it or not) Gabriel happened to her and she said yes. The plaque says "And the Word was made Flesh". That's a good sense of direction to begin Lent

with. The sacred language of Christianity is the body. Mine, yours, everybody's body. Alike and unique.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

The first recorded 'sign' that Jesus gave in public was not a lecture in a synagogue, a tweet or an acclaimed first book. It happened during a wedding in Cana in Galilee, that he attended with family and friends. His mother told him that the wine for the reception had run out. Without making a big fuss, he turned a lot of water into very good wine

Whatever 'actually' happened on that occasion - and how it became symbolised in the oral transmission that later became the New Testament tradition - is hidden in history. But the setting is important, especially for the third day of Lent. Wine is forbidden for Buddhist monks and in other religious traditions as an artificial stimulant that clouds the mind's pure state. In the biblical tradition, a psalm happily praises God for wine because it 'cheers man's heart' just as oil makes his face shine. St Benedict thought that monks should not drink it but as he was in Italy he could not persuade them, so he was content to advocate moderation. At the climax of his life Jesus chose wine, as part of a religious ritual, to symbolise how his body was indeed the sacred language of who he was and all that he was teaching.

On our pilgrimage to Cana, the married couples renewed their marriage vows. Liz and Albert King held the record at 60 years. We had the church to ourselves and we had a great time even though the only wine was in the chalice. There was a lot of fun and laughter and story-telling which was part of a Christian reverence for marriage as a symbol of Christ's relationship to his followers.

The smiling faces at the mass must have echoed the expression and mood at the wedding Jesus attended. A miserable wedding would be a nightmare. Was Jesus attending as a solemn-looking spiritual friend who didn't really want to be there, couldn't enter the fun and was only valuable because he saved the day with his first miracle? Or was he enjoying himself as part of a community of friends?

How often do we see or imagine Jesus laughing in a simple, human way, not to symbolise anything but because that's what he really felt? We all know how suddenly a smile can transform and light up a face and change the mood of a whole group. Simone Weil says that that smile of Jesus is now extended, beyond the wedding day at Cana and is spreading throughout the cosmos. She says his smile is the beauty of the world.

Our perception of beauty and its varied forms can be fleeting. But what we see is a glimpse of the true nature of reality. I was watching a flight attendant recently. He was serving a full flight and looked stressed. Yet he smiled whenever he was supposed to, even though the smile faded quickly when the moment of contact with a passenger was over. There is something sad about a smile that disappears too quickly. Genuine smiles linger on the lips and in the eyes when the signal they give is no longer needed.

Long after Cana, the smile of Jesus that irradiates us in every meditation, is still human and not an empty sign.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

In the spirit of pilgrimage – whether meditation or the life quest - we repeat things so as to better understand the meaning of what we remember. In doing so we re-present the past as a dimension of the now we are in. Time is thus telescoped and the peace we feel in doing this shows that we have, at least for the time being, passed beyond the fear of time which is essentially always the fear of death.

In trying to follow Jesus in all aspects of our life, as teacher, friend and embodiment of truth, we remember key moments of his life. This is not to fixate on the historical Jesus: 'what would Jesus do if he were here' is not really a question of faith. Faith says he *is* here. We re-member ourselves to the historical Jesus in order to become more acutely aware of his Resurrection presence. So we felt one morning when we renewed our baptismal promises at the River Jordan.

As Mark Twain was quick to point out, the Jordan is not the Mississippi. It is a very modest little river, which has an imaginative presence in many biblical stories far beyond its actual size. Similarly the field of Armageddon, which is part of the American Christian Right's Middle-Eastern politics, where the final battle of good and evil is to happen when the Jews have all returned to Israel, is about the size of a football field. When I returned to a childhood home after many years I was massively disoriented by how small it was, as if I was a giant in a dolls house.

Religious imagination needs to be controlled, which is why an apophatic, non-image based kind of prayer is an essential asceticism in a healthy religion. The fact that Jesus was baptised by John seems to have been difficult to explain for some early Christians. How could the Messiah, the Son of God, need to be baptised? For us it is obvious why, when we renew the ancient promises and bow our heads to let another person pour water over us. Because we need others. That Jesus bowed his head as we do, reinforces his humanity and illuminates ours.

Physical pilgrimage, which is a dramatic form of *lectio*, brings home to us what the Word becoming flesh means. It is not only the descent of the divine into the human, but a revelation of what humanity is capable of and destined for. God became human, as the fathers of the Church oft repeated, in order that human beings might become God.

That this does not require a cosmic battle or the destruction of our enemies is evident in the glorious ordinariness of the life of Jesus. The one in whose footsteps we are walking knew the life of a village, enjoyed the company of friends and family, went to a wedding party. The significance of his sign is that the divine is fully alive within all the human experience of life from birth to death and everything in between.

First Sunday of Lent

The modest Jordan feeds the Sea of Galilee, which is the lowest freshwater lake on earth. The site is also one of the first human settlements in the world. On our boat ride I felt that there is something we can call the spirit of place. There is a spirit of the Sea of Galilee, as there is a spirit of Bonnevaux, some energy and presence found intensely in certain places that make them feel long-familiar when you visit them for the first time.

It was here that Jesus walked on the water, saved Peter from drowning in his doubt and here that he cooked a fish breakfast for his friends after the Resurrection. Early morning, out in the boat in the middle of the lake we turned off the engine, read the scriptures referring to the lake and then sat in a large silent presence.

When Jesus calmed the storm here, he was woken up by his terrified companions who couldn't believe how he could be asleep in such a tempest. He rebuked them for their lack of trust. In the peace of the Sea of Galilee, as in the silence of the desert, our usual endless questioning and the mind's restless demand for certainty and reassurance are stilled for a while. In certain times of meditation, too, we can enter a space of deep silence and stillness, free from thought, only vaguely aware that thoughts are chattering off stage, behind the curtain. We could turn our attention to this mental noise, but why should we? We will be back there soon enough.

These times we might call 'good meditations'. But in the big picture, they are no better than the times of turbulence or struggle that we call the 'bad' or 'hard' ones. The Resurrection peace we seek and yearn for and can taste is different from both. It underlies both and contains both. This is the peace that is not shaken even when storms hit us in life or inner turbulence suddenly arises as an unexpected phase of our inner work.

The more familiar we become with this peace that we cannot understand, the more free we become from depending on 'good' meditations and fearing 'hard' ones. This freedom allowed Jesus to move through turbulence, rejection and finally of affliction and violence with the kind of detachment that does not isolate us in a bubble of self-sufficiency but strengthens our solitude in deeper relationship to others. In his case this unique identity made him present to *all* others, from the earliest human settlers on the shore of the lake, millennia before, to his friends and disciples with whom he walked from Galilee to Judaea.

In the peace of non-duality we are compassionately present to all. Out of his equanimity Jesus recognised the source of the temptations that he was prey to after his forty days in the desert. When we are awake to the universal Self it is not so difficult to face down the voice of the ego - as we see in today's Gospel (Matthew 4:1-11)