

Dear Reader,

As we totter in and out of varying degrees of lockdown and our conversations may be now by email, by telephone, by WhatsApp video, by FaceTime, Zoom and what have you, I thought I'd share with you a few thoughts on hospitality, hearing and the Holy Spirit.

In terms of counselling we recall that the Holy Spirit is the divine counsellor so that pastoral care of individuals is "the attempt to lead fearful parishioners into the silence of God, and to help them feel at home there, trusting that they will slowly discover the healing presence of the Spirit."

'We are healed by reminding folk that their wounds are related to God's wounds on the cross of Calvary and by reminding folk that our lives are redeemed, revived by being intimately related to God in Jesus Christ.' In another work the same author H.J.M. Nouwen discusses the power of friendship in the form of hospitality. "Hospitality is the ability to pay attention to the guest and therefore requires concentration and community. It requires the ability to withdraw oneself and one's own concerns and to allow oneself to be taken where, perhaps, one would rather not go (John 21:18). By withdrawing in humility one gives to, creates for the other time and space in which she can be herself and come to us on her own terms. This is 'healing because it takes away the false illusion that wholeness can be given to one by another. It is healing because it does not take away the loneliness and the pain of another, but invites him to recognise his loneliness on a level where it can be shared.'

The power and strength of hospitality enables the other to receive time and space in which she can replay past experiences, remodel them with a greater understanding through deeper perceptions and allow herself to be redeemed, recreated gradually and slowly in humility and in hope. By being alongside the other, one can help to deepen the silences in which God continues to speak to us as we remember he also did with Elijah. This slow and often painful waiting in remembrance can only be sustained by our hoping and trusting in God. The basis for this lies in the incarnation, in which God reveals the nature of his friendship with humanity.

The at-one-ment of God with humanity is usually experienced representatively (e.g. through Jesus Christ our Lord). This necessarily includes the importance of paying attention to form and content. It follows that, in whatever style, the church needs to be knowing what it is doing in celebrating rituals (sacraments) in every aspect.

'In short, God has wedded himself to humanity, has united his divine essence with our inmost being " for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health," for all eternity even though we elect to be damned. Humanity's proper conclusion is

'Here might I stay and sing  
no story so divine;  
never was love, dear King,  
never was grief like thine!  
This is my friend,  
in whose sweet praise  
I all my days  
could gladly spend.'

Through imagination and memory we share in Christ's life on earth. Remembering evokes within us the desire to be in touch again, to draw near to the other. In memorial of Jesus Christ, our pains are united with his and we are sustained: we need not try to enforce a cheerful or hollow optimism. We may be strengthened to wait in humble patience for the healing which God wills.

We have hinted that 'attitudes create events' and that at the heart of all helping relationships is a particular kind of character, personality or quality of being. Whilst this is often summed up as the ability or need to accept oneself, we would agree with Alan Keith Lucas that this is better expressed as 'not being afraid of oneself' so that one may respond in a manner at once spontaneous and based on an acquired self-discipline. Whilst this requires the qualities of a) courage, e.g. not to be defensive when being attacked, b) humility e.g. to accept no finished product and to accept not being thanked and c) a concern for others, which is not the same as either liking or disliking others, we must at this stage stress the centrality of listening.

The kingdom of God being within us (Luke 17:21), we must strive to recognise and welcome God's reign both in our own lives and in the lives of others. 'As coheirs and co-workers with Christ all that has been performed by God in Christ shall be performed in us,' (Gibbs) if we both have ears to hear and eyes to see.

We try to listen in an open, daring even courageous manner in which we both accept the other in their present state and confirm and thereby enhance their positive creative potential (Buber) and we now wish to propose that a creative and redemptive ministry will have at its deepest roots quiet contemplation of and waiting upon God. 'They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, he shall walk and not faint.' (Isaiah 40:31.)

A theological understanding of pastoral care of individuals then will suggest that we should move from professionalism, through self-denial to contemplation and hence faithful, joyous witnessing to God's covenant with humanity. We would work for more sharing than caring and for greater silence and contemplation before action.

We are reminded of Simone Weil's words "absolute unmixed attention is prayer." My hope is that these few words will give you something to reflect on during your lockdown in prayer times with Christ.

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