Dear Oblates and Friends of Prinknash

One of our Oblates humbly asked me if I would write to you, as a gesture of reaching out, with a word of reflection during these, for us, unprecedented days. This I am very happy to do. So please take this as a love letter from your unworthy abbot.

I reflected on the coronavirus lockdown at Easter and posted three reflections on our website. They should still be there, but that was over four weeks ago, and we are still in a period of social distancing.

Early on I described the restrictions imposed upon us in response to the virus as a time of grace when the world is on retreat, and that is still my view.

I have been able to use this time to reflect on the meaning and purpose of our lives in this world; something I do anyway each day as a monk. But during this period such thoughts are with me constantly. We are unable to predict when life might return to “normal.” My dictionary tells me that the etymology of normal is a carpenter’s square, a kind of right-angled ruler. I remember them from technical drawing classes at school: straight and precise, or as the dictionary says, “conforming to a standard, usual, typical or expected.” Applied to a person normal is “free from physical or mental disorders.”

I’m not qualified to tell you what life was like before the restrictions, or what it might be like afterwards. All I know is what it was like for me, and what it is like now.

I feel that something has shifted in my outlook. I’m beginning to appreciate the beauty of nature again, the songs of the birds, flowers, squirrels, fresh air and sunshine. Personally I prefer silence to noise, but I have never known it to so peaceful. I do not look forward to a full return to “normal.”

I often said during retreats, that I conducted with Sarah Richards over the past few years, that I believed something was going to happen that would bring the world to its knees. I thought it might have been a war. What I meant by this is that something would happen that would bring the world to its senses, and we would get on our knees in prayer to God. This hasn’t quite happened, but I imagine many people are asking themselves what is the meaning and purpose of life? Does God exist? Is Jesus the Saviour? Are we all beloved children of God? I expect and hope that these questions will be explored when restrictions are lifted.

We monks and the recipients of this letter have been graced with an interest in such questions, even before the present crisis, and we are heirs of the Christian and Benedictine traditions which have answers to them. When the crisis is over, I think we should explore the practicalities of sharing our knowledge and our hope with others.

Crisis means judgement in Greek. The Crucifixion was the crisis of the world; the Eastertide liturgy tells us this. The Crucifixion was God’s judgement on the world. The moment of the greatest act of love the world has ever known or even imagined! It is, as St Benedict says in the Prologue to his Rule, “God showing us the way of life:” self-sacrifice for others leads to the promise of resurrection and life everlasting.

I believe God is asking us to take stock of our lives during these weeks, to make a judgement on ourselves, and a resolve about the way we should proceed in the future. I spoke to a young, successful-in-worldy-terms, couple last week, and they told me that they do not want to return to their hectic work and lifestyles. They want to devote more time and energy to the deeper things of life. We can help such people!

How is this lecture a love letter from your unworthy abbot? It is so because I “am speaking the truth in love,” to quote St Paul. Also, the one thing I have missed during this period is the people I love, and I love all you recipients of this message, all in different ways. And I miss you. I miss sharing the faith with you, and I miss your company.

Reaching out is a good thing. It balances our tendency to self-centredness, and brings joy. During these weeks I have rediscovered a joy and a freedom that I had lost; I have rediscovered a happiness I had lost. This must be God’s grace. Hope of happiness has returned because I can see now that that is what God wants for me. This time of “judgement/crisis” is not a time of condemnation. It is, like the Cross, a time when God is showing us his love – in nature, in families, in friends, in silence and peace. God is doing to us what the Prophet Hosea said: “"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.”

God is speaking tenderly to us. He is saying what Jeremiah prophesied:

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“I have loved you with an everlasting love;
    therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.”

And the verse

**“This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.”**

This is what God is like, and it is what the world needs to know. Let us play our part; let us all reach out to one another. Maybe you could share this letter with someone!

Thankfully all the monks here are well. Br Antony went to his rest recently after 72 years as a monk. May he rest in peace

Keep well and God bless

Fr Martin