

Homily for the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time 21st June 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

After Eastertide, Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi we resume this week what is called “Ordinary” Time. The use of that word makes it sound dull and workaday, but one idea is that it really means “ordered,” time which has a pattern, a sequence to it, time which does not just go on and on but is moving towards a definite end – our union with God in his kingdom. In that sense no time is ever ordinary, but truly *extraordinary*, as it is always informed by the presence and working of God drawing us closer to himself.

During this season we resume week by week reading of the Gospel of St. Matthew. In this Sunday’s passage we hear Jesus twice say to us, ‘Do not be afraid.’ I think it was in a book of Pope John Paul that I once read that these are the most frequently repeated words in Scripture. Over and over, through prophets, through angels, through his Son, God says to his people, ‘Do not be afraid.’ This is something quite new in the history of religion. Before modern technology enabled us to dominate and transform the world around us it was natural for primitive mankind to think of the world as a hostile and dangerous place, full of unseen traps and lurking perils, and God or the gods as powerful beings who control the world and were not particularly concerned for or interested in the human race – except to keep us in our place of subservience and homage to them. Coronavirus may have at least the virtue of reminding us that although we think we can be in control of nature, we never are and nature will often show us how much more powerful it is. As a Roman poet put it, *You may drive nature out with a pitchfork, but it will always coming running back again!*

Judaism and Christianity introduced for the first time the belief that God is the creator of all that is, and that he is a God of love – for love is necessarily creative and creativity is an act of love. He is a God who loves all he creates and therefore desires that the people he creates should love him – since love always calls for a loving response. Not only does he desire this, but in Jesus he makes it possible for us to respond to him in this way, for Jesus is the incarnation of self-giving, all-encompassing divine love.

Because this belief runs counter to our normal ways of thinking we are always in danger of slipping back into older, more primitive attitudes – seeing God as a hostile, judging, punishing God whom we have constantly to appease by offering him sacrifices and prayers. It hardly needs saying that this attitude is still alive and strong in varieties of Christianity today. This, I think, is why God has to keep telling us not to be afraid, but turn to him willingly and give ourselves to trust in his love and care. Doing so will not immediately solve all our own problems or the problems of the world – life will go on much as it usually does - but it will give us a different, more hopeful orientation which will enable us to live our lives in a more loving, less fearful way, believing that God is indeed present in all things and bringing all things to their completion in him.



The Scriptures, the Word of God, can be helpful here in building up our faith. There are, for instance, the psalms that are sung daily at the office of Compline, or Night Prayer, the last prayer of the day in monasteries such as Ealing Abbey, near where I live, psalms chosen to give the assurance of God's protection as we enter the hours of darkness that presage the darkness of death itself. Here are verses from one of them, Psalm 91: *you will not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the plague that prowls in the darkness nor the scourge that lays waste at noon. Upon you no evil shall fall, no plague approach where you dwell. For you has he commanded his angels to keep you in all your ways.* Especially now I am sure many of us will want to echo those words in fervent prayer.

After Compline the monks are expected to retire for the night and go into *The Great Silence* which will not be broken until breakfast the following morning. A few years ago a remarkable film with that title proved an unexpected success. It was made at the father-house of the Carthusian order in the French Alps near Grenoble. Carthusians are perhaps the most austere of the religious orders, spending much of the day in silence and solitude in their own cell (a suite of rooms with a small garden) and coming together only for the prayers they say in church. The film-maker had to agree that he would only show the monks in their daily life with no commentary or interviews or background music. Verses of Scripture appeared at intervals on the screen and the camera would regularly hold the face of a monk for half a minute or so, almost as if one were looking into his soul – and what was patently visible was his calmness and sense of being quite untroubled and at ease with himself. We could all do with some of that! As I watched the film I was wondering whether religious life really does need to be as austere as this, but I ended thinking, 'I'm glad they are there. I'm glad I'm not there with them! But I am glad they are there doing what they do, praying for us and giving an example of what everyone can be.'

Religious life, after all, is only one specialised form of what we are all called to be, people who know God in a real personal way and live our lives, everything we do, out of that knowledge. And the way to that knowledge is to pray as the monks do, letting go of ourselves, our concerns and preoccupations and simply resting in God's presence with us and in us. This is what it means to be *contemplative*, not *thinking* about anything, not even thinking about God,

but *being* in God, and the contemplative way is the way for all Christian people since it is the way of Christ himself. Being a Christian is not so much a matter of believing things or doing things, but above all of being, being *in* Christ, as St. Paul puts, sharing the divine-human life that is in him. Belief and action follow from that.

Spending time letting go of ourselves and being with God will always be time well spent and indeed is essential if we are to grow in faith, but we need something to help us to do this. A simple way, well tried and practised, is to pray a single short form of words over and over for the time you have, giving it your attention and using it as a focus or anchor to keep your own thoughts at bay. You could, for example, use the Jesus Prayer of the Russian Orthodox tradition: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me*. Sit, be still and quiet and inside yourself repeat these words. But there are many other ways. Anything you can do which will help you to still your beating mind and just be there with God can be followed.

Our churches are now open again for what is being called *private* prayer, but strictly speaking this is a misnomer. Christian prayer is never private in the sense that it is my prayer alone, it is always taking part in the prayer of Christ through the Spirit dwelling within us. It is not what we do, or I do, but Christ praying in me. Insofar as I am doing anything it is simply being in touch with the prayer of Christ going on at the centre of the human person. The more we can do this the better prepared we will be for resuming our participation in the celebration of Mass when that becomes possible. Meantime happy contemplation!

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

Fr Robin is happy to receive any comments or questions you may have. He can be contacted at robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk