

Homily for the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

I was settling down to write something for this week, with only a vague idea of what I wanted to write about, when the electricity in our flat suddenly went off. The outage did not last long, but for a moment or two I began to wonder what it would be like if power supplies throughout the world did give out completely and we no longer had electricity or gas or anything to provide power to all the many machines we now use, including of course the computer I am using –a fearful prospect.

It reminded me of a strange book I read not long ago, *The Second Sleep*, by Robert Harris. As the story begins you imagine from the descriptions that it is set in the Middle Ages, long before our modern technology, but it turns out to be about 800 years in the future when the world has experienced a great disaster, ‘a systemic collapse of technical civilization’ the reasons for which are not explained, and life has reverted to what it was centuries ago. We are getting a taste of this kind of situation with the Coronavirus pandemic. So much of what we take for granted in our lives has been on hold and maybe that will make us think again about what really is important.

This Sunday’s Gospel reading includes a favourite text of mine and probably of many other people, words of Jesus which can be a source of great comfort:

*‘Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened,
and I will give you rest.*

Shoulder my yoke and learn from me,

for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls.

Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light.’

Faith can be a means to comfort in difficult times, but faith, if it is real, is not easy or easily bought. Following the ways of God will mean sharing our burdens with him, and knowing he is with us in everything we endure as well as enjoy, but also experiencing the burdens for ourselves.

Having faith will not in itself solve the problems we face in our lives – illness, bereavement, unemployment, whatever they may be, nor will it solve the problems of the world in general. What it can do, however, is give us a different and more hopeful orientation towards our lives and the world in which we live, and enable us to live them out of the deep centre of our human make-up which is the Spirit of God within us. The second reading on this Sunday from St. Paul says that ‘the Spirit of God has made his home in you,’ so that we are able to lead spiritual lives and not unspiritual ones.

What this means is, I think, much the same as something that was later taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola, one of our most reliable guides to the spiritual life, who speaks of consolation and desolation. He does, however, have his own particular take on these terms. If we are in a state of consolation, or comfort, we know that we are in touch with God. Everything else in our lives may be in turmoil, but at the heart of us we know that we are in God and God is in us. To be in desolation, conversely, means to be cut off from God even if our lives are going well and we are contented.

This accords very much with the teaching of Jesus on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. You remember he says that when you pray you should go into your inner room, shut the door and be with your Father in that inner space, for he does not look so much at the surface of things but at what is going on in secret. There is a little joke here, for not many people in the time of Our Lord would have had private rooms in their house to which they could retreat to be on their own. It is therefore believed that he does not mean a physical place, but the heart, the centre of the human person. To be with God means going to that centre and closing out everything else, so that we can just be with God.

How do we do this? One simple way is to be quiet and still, let go of our thoughts, ideas and feelings, and gently repeat a single word or prayer-phrase, such as the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me*. Give the words your attention, but do not think about their meaning or indeed about anything.

To pray in this way is what is called *contemplation*, a word which means ‘being in the temple with God,’ the temple of the Holy Spirit which is our human self. We do a lot of talking to God and thinking about God in our prayer and worship, we tell him how wonderful he is and what we want him to do for us, but this is always *our* words, *our* thinking. More and more I believe that if we are really to grow in knowledge of God we need to go beyond our words and thinking and move more towards the contemplative mode and contemplative ways of prayer. This is not necessarily easy and can even be daunting, as we may fear a loss of control if we let go of our thoughts, but if we realise that is in order to free ourselves and hand everything over to God there is never any need of fear, for God can only ever want what is best for us in every possible way, here and hereafter. He could not otherwise be what we believe him to be, a God of universal love and compassion.

We are all looking forward to being able to be together with others again, in pubs and restaurants, at school and at work and of course in church. I do hope, however, that we will have learned from this time of crisis the vital importance for faith of the contemplative way, the path of interiority, because this really is the way of Christ. He went to Jerusalem to take part in the festivals and rituals of his religion, but if he wanted to be with God he went off to be on his own, leaving behind or letting go of everything that ordinarily filled his life. In this way he is the model of what we can be and what we need to do if we are truly to be the people of God.

Wishing you very blessing, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)

P.S. We can do with some light relief from time to time, so I can recommend an earlier book of that writer Robert Harris, a novel called *Conclave*, in which he imagines a gathering of cardinals in Rome to elect a new Pope. He must have done a lot of research as the details read very convincingly, though I find some of the story-line fairly unbelievable. An entertaining read if you do not take it too seriously!

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