

Homily for the Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

Writers of science-fiction often dream of the possibility of suspended animation, human beings kept in a state like hibernation so that they can be transported for many years to far off planets or travel on a time machine into a distant future, and wake up no older than the day they set out. Our current state of Coronavirus makes it seem as if our life is in a state of suspense. Everything is on hold as we wait for things to return to normal. How we long to be able to shop without queueing, go to a cricket match or the cinema without having to worry about distancing or wearing a face-covering to mask our humanity. And who knows when we will re-emerge from this state into something more like normality?

All this reminds me of a book I once read called *The Stature of Waiting*. It pointed out a pattern we can see in the Gospels. Jesus at first is in control, able to direct events, masterful and commanding. He is like the centurion who says to his servant, 'Do this,' and he does it; 'Go there,' and he goes. As the story goes on, however, and especially as it reaches its culmination in the last week of his earthly life, Jesus is more and more at the mercy of events and people, unable to affect what happens to him, only having to suffer and endure, waiting to see what will come next. He is also increasingly silent at this time, as nothing he can say will make any difference. He is, however, able to recognise that through it all somehow the Father's will is being done and finds the faith to give himself to that: 'Not my will, but yours be done.'

The writer suggested that since it is through these events of his suffering and death that Jesus works out our salvation, there is something essentially Christ-like in the business of waiting. We might think of the amount of time in our lives that we spend in waiting – waiting for the bus or train, waiting for exam results or the results of a medical check-up, even just waiting for our favourite TV programme to come on. This can seem like a nothing-very-much state when we long for it to be over and what we are waiting for arrives, but if we can give ourselves to it and simply be there we can turn it round and make something positive of it.

There are religious beliefs which hold that everything in the world is an illusion and nothing that happens in it is of any ultimate worth or meaning. The Christian faith cannot say this since we believe that the world is the creation of God and our lives here and now are preparations for

the life to come. God cares about his creation so much that he is prepared to lay aside his divine nature and be born as a slave in order to bring humanity back to himself. What we can perhaps say is that nothing in the world or our lives or what happens to us can ever be as important as the presence and reality of God. We live simultaneously on two planes which are one. Even the most ordinary mundane situation is infused with the being of God. He is just as much there as we wait in line for the supermarket check-out as in our deepest experiences of joy, love and delight, or for that matter suffering and despair.

For some years now I have been taken with the prayer of Christian meditation, a form of contemplative prayer in which we are not talking to God, telling him our needs and desires, or even thinking about God, but just seeking to be present to him as we believe he is present to us. The whole tradition of Christian prayer says that the way to do this is to let go of our own thoughts and feelings and be in the present moment. God is here, God is now, God is with us: to be with him we need to be here and now, but often in thoughts we are all over the place.

I was intrigued to discover that the snooker champion Ronnie O'Sullivan in an interview spoke of the importance of being in the present, not getting caught up in thoughts of what has happened before in the game or what may happen in the future, but addressing the current situation as it is. You may also notice that as they line up their next shot snooker players observe a moment of intense focus and stillness, and the more focused and still the moment can be the more successful will be the shot when they come to play it. You can sense this even in very quick players like Ronnie the Rocket.

We cannot in prayer let go of our thoughts by an act of will, we need something to help us. If you have ever tried to dispel your distractions in prayer or at Mass you will know you cannot do it by willing it, you need to refocus your attention away from yourself. Again the tradition says be simple. Take just a single word, repeat it constantly inside yourself for your time of prayer and give it as full an attention as you can. John Main, a monk of Ealing Abbey, who taught this way, suggested as a very good prayer-phrase the Aramaic word *Maranatha* that occurs in Scripture. It means, 'Come, Lord,' which more or less sums up most of what we ever want to say in prayer, but it is not the meaning we attend to, because doing that may set other thoughts going. It is using the word as an anchor to keep our thoughts at bay – then we hand everything over to God.

As well as the set times of prayer we can use the word at other times to remind us we are with God. When you are out driving, for instance, and every traffic light you come to is red, instead of fretting and fuming why not just go *Maranatha*, as you wait for the lights to change? -

thereby transforming the negative state into a positive reminder that we are with God there as much as we are anywhere else.

I think it was St. Francis of Assisi who was approached once when he was gardening by some people who said, 'If you were to discover that this will be the last day of your life, what would you do?' They expected him to say something very deeply religious, but he thought for a while and said, 'I would carry on gardening – but I would give the whole of myself to the doing of it.' If we believe that God is always in the moment, the time and place where we are, we do not need to do anything else, we simply need to be there with him in whatever the situation may be and give ourselves to it as fully as we can - and that will be the best preparation for being with God in eternity.

This surely is what Christ was able to do naturally, without supernatural effort, but certainly with human effort. He had to find the wherewithal to give himself to God's presence and will even in the direst circumstances. We human beings will I imagine always find it an effort, and that is why we constantly have to turn to Christ and see in him the presence of God at work. His question to the disciples in the Gospel reading for this Sunday, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' is a perpetual challenge to us as well. We can hope that like Peter we will be able to respond, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,' but more than just saying it and believing it we need to practice the letting go of self and giving of ourselves to God's will that we see in Christ. If we can do that we can turn even this in-between Coronavirus state into a positive discovery of God in all things.

Wishing you every blessing and a happy week,

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