

Dear Friends,

Something that Coronavirus has brought home to us very clearly is that we are not in control. There are areas of our life where we are pretty much at the mercy of events and cannot determine or anticipate what will happen to us. Being struck down by sudden illness or loss of employment is an obvious dramatic example of this, but there many instances in ordinary daily life that show it to us as well: trains cancelled without warning, traffic lights turning red each time we approach them, our favourite brand of this or that not being available on the supermarket shelves.

It is a hard lesson to learn, because we like to be in control and like think that we are in control of our lives and can direct the course of events, but everyone born into this world soon discovers that it is not so. A large part of becoming a mature human person is learning to recognise what we cannot do anything about and – this is the important point – not denying the feelings of disappointment, frustration or anger our powerlessness causes, but being able to let go of them. Like most things letting go becomes easier with practice, but what will help most in learning how to let go is knowing that there is Someone who is in control and is much better at it than we are: that is God of course.

When I travelled regularly on the Underground to central London I often found that an annoying person would infallibly come and sit next to me, someone who encroached on my space and privacy by having a loud conversation on his mobile phone or listening through earphones to music which I could also hear or looking over my shoulder to read my newspaper – really irritating that one! I came to see that there was nothing I could do about this sort of creating a scene in the carriage (which, being English, we are always loth to do), but what I could do is remind myself that this person next to me who is being a pain is loved by God. If I want to be loved by God myself, I need to realise that he will love everyone else in the same way and to the same extent, including and especially those I find it hard to love. And introducing God into the equation makes a wonderful difference. It does not change the situation or how you feel about it, but it does enable you to let go of the negative feelings more easily and recapture a sense of proportion or perspective. After all it does not really matter if my quiet journey is broken in upon by others, it is only my thinking it does that makes it matter. Once I can say of another person he/she is loved by God it changes the way I react to them. I cannot think about them in the same way, I can even begin to relate to them in a more human way, not being separated, standoffish and dismissive, but seeing in them the face of Christ.

I think this is something of what Jesus means when he says in the Gospel reading for this Sunday (a key message in Scripture), *If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.*

What could losing our life mean if not letting go of the thoughts and feelings and ideas that preoccupy us most of the time, what we think is our true self, and relaxing into being in and with God, which is our true state? Because this is not easy to do it will feel like hard work, even

quite excruciating, which is why we resist it. A quick definition of suffering is: not being in control. Anything that makes us aware of our lack of control will be difficult to deal with - it will be a form of suffering, but there is no other way. We must suffer and die in order to be reborn – this is how we recapitulate in ourselves the pattern of death and resurrection that we see in Christ. It is not that God wants us to suffer or enjoys seeing us being put through it, it is simply the way it is, and if we can give ourselves to the letting go we will discover that God is there with us in the process, enduring it with us in Christ and leading us through it to a new birth, a new discovery of who he is and what we can be in him.

The second reading in this Sunday's Mass from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans reminds me of a slightly later anonymous text known as the Letter to Diognetus, dating maybe from the end of the 1st century, which describes the life of the first Christian communities. They are not distinguished by any particular customs or practices. They do not live apart from others, they live much the same kind of life as most people, wear the same kind of clothes, eat the same kind of food, live in the same kind of houses. What marks them out is that they know they are at the same time dwellers on the earth and citizens of heaven. This brings them no special credit or even respect among others: in fact, they are sometimes cursed and persecuted, but they never repay with a curse – instead they bless. They are able to turn round the negative elements in human life into something positive because they know that God is present and at work in all situations, in all places and times that humans inhabit.

In this way Christians act as a leaven, or as the writer says like the soul to the body. The soul, the Spirit of God within, is what gives life to our human condition. In a similar way, by the witness of the way they live Christians point to the true nature of humanity and the world as indwelt and given life by the presence of God. I think it is important to be reminded that we are the Church not just to save ourselves, still less to congratulate ourselves for being right when everyone else is wrong, but to be of use to the world and people at large. As someone said, the Church is the only body that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members!

This why we need our times of prayer and worship, the Mass and the sacraments. We need to be renewed and refreshed by God, and give time to that, so that we can live our lives more readily out of our true centre and so bear witness to the world of what we all can be in Christ.

Wishing you every blessing in this new week, Fr. Robin

robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk