

Dear Friends,

On my one and only visit to the USA we stayed for one week at a retreat house on a small island off the coast of Connecticut. The house was run by the Society of St. Edmund, a religious order who set up the parish of Whitton, where I was helping for two years. While I was there we had a visit from the last American to be parish priest before the Americans withdrew and the parish reverted to the diocese. He said to me, 'You must come over and see us some time.' Americans really mean it when they say this (English people might say it, but not really mean it and be disagreeably surprised if you did turn up one day!), so we did and had a wonderful holiday enjoying the Edmundites' hospitality.

The principal in charge of the house had a little vineyard on the island. In Scripture, as we hear in the readings for this Sunday's Mass, the vineyard is often an image for the world as the arena for God's work. We have the psalm response, 'The vineyard of the Lord is the House of Israel' or by extension the Church and the whole people of God, and the Gospel reading presents Christ as the heir to the owner of the vineyard.

Vines are a natural growth, but need much care and cultivation in order to produce their best. One day the principal suggested we go and have a look at his vines, of which he was quite proud, and maybe pick some of the grapes. But oh dear, the grapes were shrivelled and dried up and not of much use - because he had not been doing the necessary pruning! Jesus in the Gospels compares himself to a vinedresser and ourselves as his vines, who need to be pruned in order to bear fruit. The dead bits have to be cut away so that new life may emerge.

You could say we are undergoing some pruning at the present time through the Coronavirus pandemic. It is not a pleasant experience, but if some dead bits in us are being cut away then we can believe that we will come through to new life. It could be, therefore, that we can see this time as something like a prolonged Lent, a time to take stock and focus on what is really important, a time to prepare ourselves for what God has in store for us. St. Benedict in his *Rule* for guiding the life of religious communities says that the life of the monk should always have something of the character of Lent about it. That does not immediately sound like an attractive prospect, because we tend to think of Lent in negative terms - a time for giving things up, something we do not enjoy and find hard to do, but if we can think of it as necessary preparation for enjoying God's gifts we can make it much more positive.

One of the books I read recently was Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. It reads like a vivid eyewitness account of the Great Plague of London, but in fact Defoe was only 14 years old in 1665 and must have compiled it later from other narratives. There are many resemblances between what happened then and what we have been going through in 2020. Although medical knowledge was not nearly as advanced as it is today, they did realise that the only way to halt the spread of the plague was to isolate its victims, but had to ensure they were supplied with food and medicines. Defoe records instances of kindness and compassion towards those suffering from the plague, just as people report today. Sometimes great crises bring out the best in people!

The plague raged for many months, but then disappeared as mysteriously as it had come, and life returned to normal. People were clearly changed, however, by the experience and at least

some learned the lessons. They could hardly have been ready, however, for the next disaster to strike suddenly and devastate London - the Great Fire of 1666. In worldly terms we never know what may happen next, but in spiritual terms we can always look forward in hope, for as Christians we believe that we are moving towards God's future, which will be the best possible outcome there could be for us - no less than to enjoy his eternal life.

How can we prepare ourselves for what God has in store for us? Life itself, with its uncertainty and unpredictability, will always perform some of the necessary pruning that makes us realise what really matters, what is really important, but is there anything else we can do ourselves?

I was asked this question several times by an elderly woman whom I used to see for spiritual direction. She was well into her nineties, and nearly every time we met she would say, 'In the nature of things I am not likely to live much longer. What should I do to prepare for my death?' It is hard to know how to answer that, but I remembered a story told about St. Francis of Assisi which I thought might help. He was doing some gardening one day and people came to him who said, 'If you were to discover that this is going to be your last day on earth what would you do?' They expected him to say something very religious, but after pondering for a while he simply said, 'I would go on gardening - but I would do it with as much loving attentiveness as I can muster.'

God is always present to us wherever we are, whatever we are doing. If we can give ourselves to the present moment as fully, as wholeheartedly as we can, then we will be present to God. In a way it does not matter what we are doing as much as doing it in that self-giving attentive way. So I told my 90-year-old that alongside her regular prayer and worship she should just go living her life as fully as she could. As we age and things get more difficult to manage this is not easy. We find we cannot do the things we used to or want to, but whatever our condition it is always possible to say, 'I will give myself to this moment and what I am doing in it,' knowing that God is here. That may be the best preparation we can make for enjoying God's life in eternity, because although we cannot know exactly what it will be it will be the same God whom we can know here and now to whom we will be present in a totally open, unrestricted way of which now we only have glimpses, 'seeing through a glass darkly,' as Saint Paul says, whereas then 'we will see face to face.'

This Sunday, October 4, is the date of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, a favourite saint of many people and an example of selfless and heroic dedication to God and his service. We may feel we could never be like him, but we might remember that the members of the early Church were known as *hagioi* or *sancti*, the saints, holy ones - not because we are holy ourselves, but because God is holy and God lives in us. We can use the time we have now to prepare ourselves to know him fully, completely in the afterlife by knowing him a little better day by day.

SAINT FRANCIS, PRAY FOR US.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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