

Dear Friends,

My daily readings at present include the book of Ruth, one of the more attractive parts of the Old Testament. It is very short, so you can read it in one go as a story, but it has many details which we can reflect on.

A family from Bethlehem escapes famine by going to live in the distant land of Moab. There the father dies, leaving his wife Naomi with her two sons, who marry women of the country. When the two sons also die, Naomi decides to return to Judah, having heard that conditions in her homeland have improved. She gives her daughters-in-law the choice of going with her or staying in Moab. One stays, the other Ruth chooses to go with her. She says these famous words:

*Where you go I will go;
where you lodge I will lodge;
your people shall be my people
and your God my God.*

At the end of the story Ruth marries her kinsman Boaz and has a son who becomes the father of Jesse, father of David, so she is part of the line of descent leading eventually to Joseph, the husband of Mary, and so to the Holy Family.

In deciding to leave her own country and go with Naomi to Bethlehem Ruth is engaging in quite a hazardous venture, since she can have little idea of how things will work out. She has nothing to rely on but her love and trust, and in giving herself in this way she is doing something very Godlike. We say that God is omniscient, meaning that he knows all things, past, present and future, but in giving his Son to share our human life he is taking the risk that people may not accept him, as indeed many do not. Being God, however, the God of universal love and compassion, he can do no other - it is his nature to give himself, entrust himself totally, without reserve, to his people.

I heard a very good 'Thought for the Day' on the radio this week, by the Chief Rabbi. He said that the Hebrew language has seven distinct words for a gift, with different shades of meaning. One of them - he called it the highest grade - is a gift which has been carefully considered to be exactly the right offering, something the recipient most needs more than anything else.

This is the time of year when we are thinking what presents we should give to friends and relations at Christmas, and we will know ourselves that the best presents are not necessarily the most expensive or fanciest, but ones where the giver has taken time and trouble to think out what will give the person receiving the most pleasure or be most useful. This is not easy, of course, it does take time, as it is a matter essentially of giving not so much an object, but oneself - and again this is what God does for us. We could have all the things we desire in material terms - health, wealth and happiness - but they would not necessarily satisfy us if we were alone and unloved - multibillionaires know this better than anyone! Parents know that

they can buy their children off with expensive presents, but what their children need most is their parents' time, love and attentiveness. God knows that what we most need as human beings is to be loved and valued not for what we have or what we can do, or for how much we own, but simply for ourselves - and this is precisely what he gives us in giving Jesus his Son. And what can we give in return? The carol *In the bleak midwinter* has the answer in its final verse.

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;
if I were a rich man I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him, give my heart.*

In the end all we can offer to God is ourselves, our loving attention, as best we can.

On this third Sunday of Advent we hear of John the Baptist, the great forerunner of Our Lord's coming, who prepared people to welcome Jesus by offering them the baptism of repentance, that is turning away from whatever is not of God in ourselves, our lives and our world, and reorienting ourselves so that we are turned towards God, open to receiving what he wants to give.

I think it is significant that John appears and carries out his mission in the *wilderness*. The desert of Judah is a hot, dusty and empty place, seemingly bereft of life. I once spent some time sitting on a hillside there with others, praying and reflecting in silence, when Bedouin traders appeared, wanting to sell us their colourful cloths and fabrics. In a way it was reassuring to know that there were people eking out a living even in this barren setting.

What we found as we sat looking out at the stark landscape is what one often finds in the desert - that being cut back to the essentials of existence sharpens our insight and can give a deeper and clearer awareness of what really matters - can make us more aware of and open to the presence of God. I feel sure that this is what John experienced in his wilderness; it was what led him to know that his cousin Jesus would be the one who could baptise people with the Holy Spirit, that is, give them the fullness of God in their human lives. In relation to him John saw that 'he must increase, I must decrease.'

The more we empty ourselves the more we can be filled with the fullness of God. This is why being in the desert, though it is an uncomfortable place to be, can be such an aid to growth, and the desert in this sense need not be a physical location as much as a state of being. Our current situation of hope and uncertainty in the face of the pandemic, encouraged by the possibility of the vaccine, but still having to endure the restrictions under which we are living, can well feel like being in a desert, deprived of things we enjoy, cut back to the essentials. But also like the physical desert there is always life going on, God is present and blessing us in many ways.

A helpful exercise, highly recommended by St. Ignatius, is to make an inventory of what we can thank God for. You may think there is nothing much to thank God for just now, but when you

take time to look at your life and ask how has God blessed me just today, just this morning, in the last few hours, you can even surprise yourself by what you come to see. It may not be in big dramatic ways, but in the ordinary things of everyday life that we are aware of love, of self-giving, of being gifted and blessed - the primary Hebrew word for gift is *b'rakhah*, a blessing: and this is how we are aware of God's presence. The second reading of this Sunday's Mass from St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians has these words:

*Be happy at all times; pray constantly;
and for all things give thanks to God.
May the God of peace make you perfect and holy,
and may you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body,
for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
God has called you and he will not fail you.*

Wishing you many blessings in the coming week,

Fr. Robin

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