

Dear Friends,

We all have favourite places that we like to go back to. One of mine I cannot now go back to, was a retreat centre, Loreto House, near Buncrana in Donegal, the most northerly county in the extreme north-west of Ireland, a rugged far away land of mystery and romance. The house sadly closed some years ago, but I remember it well as a most attractive place to make a retreat, which I did several times. It stands on the shore of Lough Swilly, a large lake that opens into the sea and so has tidal waters. You look across to the hills on the other side of the lake, and at low tide there are great stretches of sandy beach where you can walk for a long way from the house. During retreats I often made that walk, usually accompanied by Jack.

Jack was a little dog who lived in the house: he had a kennel in the inner courtyard. His greatest joy and delight was to go for a walk on the beach, but he needed someone to go with who could open the gate for him leading from the grounds of the house. Whenever anyone set off for a walk, even if he was not around Jack would somehow know and appear from nowhere. At first he would look quizzically at you, because you could be going in a different direction, but as soon as you made for the beach he would rush up, jumping up and down, trying to get you to go on faster and open the gate. Then as soon as you did he would dash away over the sand, run into the water, bark at the waves and come running back, then trot away again.

I must have spent quite a lot of time on these walks with Jack, looking at him and wondering about him. It occurred to me that he probably did not know he was a dog. Human beings can think about themselves and decide, 'I am a human person, not an elephant or a chimpanzee,' but animals, I imagine, cannot do this because for the most part they lack the human capacity for self-reflection, thinking about ourselves, weighing things up, categorising and defining. It is this capacity that has made possible the wondrous, spectacular achievements of human civilisation, art, technology, but spiritually it can be a disadvantage and even get in the way of our knowing God. 'Imagination,' it has been said, 'is the enemy of prayer' - because it can distract us from being where God is, in the present time and place. Animals and children are much better at this than adult people, who are all the time in their thoughts, remembering, projecting, planning, dreaming, fantasising – doing everything in fact except be where they are. Again we need to say that our mental faculties are a great blessing, but they can also be a curse. In fact the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis shows us that the birth of self-conscious awareness - they were afraid because they knew they were naked - is what causes the Fall of Man, our primeval separation from God.

Saint Paul in this Sunday's readings at Mass says, 'I would like to see you free from all worry,' and we think would it not be wonderful if we could be, but how to go about it? On another visit to Donegal we went two or three times to Mass in a local church, where the priest used to add a word to one of the prayers. After the Our Father where we used to say, 'protect us from all anxiety,' he would say, 'all *useless* anxiety,' and I heard him do it more than once, so it was deliberate on his part. I think he is right that a lot of our anxiety is pretty useless. There must be some forms of anxiety that can be *useful*, warning lights to bid us beware and be on our guard, but I have heard it said that of all the things that people worry and are anxious about, 95% will not happen. (How this has been calculated I do not know, but it rings true). You could say that still leaves 5% where we really do need to worry, but it also means that we spend a vast amount of emotional energy being anxious about things that are not going to happen.

There is probably not much we can do about this, since we cannot by an act of will stop ourselves thinking and many thoughts will occur whether we want them to or not. But once you realise that this is how we human beings are, you can find strategies for deflecting your thinking and let it be without getting too caught up in it.

Benedictine monks devote a large part of their daily prayer reciting and praying the psalms. I heard a monk being asked which was his favourite psalm and somehow expected him to say one of the less familiar, more unusual ones, so I was surprised when he said Psalm 95, as this one must have been very familiar to him. It is the psalm chosen to begin the regular daily round of prayer in the Church, chosen for this purpose because it contains the words we have as a response in this Sunday's Mass:

*Oh that today you would listen to his voice!  
Harden not your hearts.*

God's people did harden their hearts against him in the wilderness on their forty-year pilgrimage to the promised land when they complained of having no water. But we can harden our hearts in all sorts of ways, and certainly do so when we do get too much taken up with our own feelings and desires and allow them to dominate us and get in the way of God's presence and love.

The monk explained that he liked the psalm both because it was very familiar (we usually like what we are familiar with), but also because of that line and the invitation it contains. Each new day as it comes to us is a new beginning, a new opportunity to hear God, to know God, to be with God afresh. The past is gone, the future is not yet. We need not be preoccupied with memories of what we

have done or what has happened to us before now, nor with the feelings those memories evoke, nor do we need to project into the future and hope for or fear what it may bring. Here and now, this place, this time where we are, is where God is for us, so if we can lay aside our thoughts, or at least take our attention off them, then we can be where God is – and that knowledge that God is, God is here and now, and I am with him, is our surest guard against anything that life may have to throw against us.

An Irish sister, Kathleen O’Sullivan, suggested what she called a *minute oasis*. As you go through the day doing what you do, and it seems all rather humdrum and ordinary, so you experience a thirst or hunger for something more, stop what you are doing and rest for a few moments. You do not need to say any prayers or ponder over anything, you do not need to do anything. Just be still and quiet, let go of everything else and be where you are – and know that God is with you. ‘Be still and know that I am God,’ as another psalm puts it. It can be like an oasis, a place of refreshment in the heat of the desert, and the more we have such moments the more that sense of being with God can grow and inform everything we do, everything we are.

People recognised in Jesus, in his healing, his teaching and feeding the needy, an authority that their religious leaders lacked. It made a deep impression on them, as we hear in the Sunday Gospel, and it was what led many to follow him and join him in his mission. It was so evident that God was in him, as God is in all things and if we want to we can be with him in all things.

Wishing you every blessing,

Fr. Robin

([robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk](mailto:robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)).