

Dear Friends,

After the Christmas season, which ended last Sunday, we have resumed what is called Ordinary Time, time which does not come within the special seasons of the Church's year. This is a short period before the season of Lent and Easter, not far ahead now, and then after Eastertide there is a longer period of Ordinary Time until the year begins again at Advent and so on to Christmas.

To call something "ordinary" makes it sound uninteresting, nothing very special, just workaday - and a large part of our lives does after all have that quality, going along day by day in a humdrum sort of way. We get up, we have our meals, we go to work, we say our prayers, we watch TV in the evening, go to bed, and next day we get up, ... etc. So it goes on day by day. Nothing out of the ordinary. I believe, however, that the intention of Ordinary Time is to suggest not that, but rather time that is *ordered*, that proceeds in a sequence which has a pattern, order to it. Last week I was reading from the little known book of Scripture known as Ecclesiasticus and came across a wonderful passage on the beauty and harmony of creation. The world as created by God has an order to it, everything fits together, and it is always filled by the presence of God who is forming, moulding, guiding it and everything in it in accord with his own will and purposes. It is one of the standard arguments to "prove" that God exists: the universe shows evidence of having been designed, it is not just random or haphazard, and if it has been designed there must be Someone, some being who did the designing.

Here is a sample of Ecclesiasticus that I found especially inspiring:

*The clear vault of the sky shines forth
like heaven itself, a vision of glory.
The orb of the sun, resplendent at its rising:
what a wonderful work of the Most High!
Great indeed is the Lord who made it,
at whose orders it urges on its steeds.
The moon too that marks the changing times,
governing the seasons, their lasting sign.
The beauty, the glory of the heavens, are the stars:
that adorn with their sparkling the heights of God,
at whose command they keep their place
and never relax in their vigils.*

Many people have reported that with our life and busy-ness slowing down as a result of the pandemic, they are seeing things more clearly and becoming more aware of the wonders of nature all around in plants and animals, in rocks and streams. During the week of 9/11 I was leading a retreat in a fairly remote country district, with no large centres of population nearby. With little light being projected from the earth, unlike being in a big city, it was possible to see the stars in a way I had not done for many years - and what a glorious spectacle it was, the sparkling and glittering array displayed in the heavens for all to see. Science and astronomy tell us that stars are

balls of flaming gas billions of miles distant from our earth, but knowing that seems only to increase and deepen the mystery and beauty of the universe created by God to be our home.

So time is not just one thing after another, but the medium in which the world and our lives are proceeding closer and closer to the heart of God's creating love, the medium through which we move ever closer to him. In this way all time is *Extraordinary* since it is God's time and always has for us the possibility of being more in touch with him. The daily round of prayer in the Church begins with Psalm 95 which has the line, 'Oh that today you would listen to his voice!' Each day that comes to us with its wonders is a new opportunity for us to know God afresh - in the world around us, in ourselves and other people, in the events and happenings of our lives. God's presence is what makes all time extraordinary, not so much time itself: just as the Holy Land is holy not because of its people or history but because it is the place where God chose to make himself known in special, definitive way.

It is the listening perhaps that we find hard to do, since we are so taken up with other things that crowd out the voice of God - all the ingredients of our daily lives that we have to attend to. This is why it is vital to have times of rest and repose, quiet and stillness in which we do not do anything else, but seek only to attend to God - our prayer and worship can be these times. As well as that, we are well aware that there are many features of our world and our lives which draw us away from God and immerse us in darkness and evil, everything that we call sin - which is not necessarily our wrongdoing but the whole state of separation from God that is part of our human inheritance alongside our God-given ability to know God, to love and serve him. It is important, therefore, to remember that, as St Paul says, in reality nothing can ever separate us from God: in fact I have heard it said that the only thing that separates us from God is the *thought* that we are separate from God. We may feel or imagine ourselves to be away from him, but he is always present to us, and if we wish to we can be present to him: it is a matter of trying to get beyond our own thinking and let God be God in us and for us.

In the readings for this Sunday we hear the famous story of the boy Samuel being called by God. At first he mishears and thinks it is his master Eli calling him - as human beings we do make mistakes, misinterpret and get things wrong. But God is persistent and at the third call Samuel realises it is God and is able to say, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.' The account tells us that 'Samuel had as yet no knowledge of the Lord,' but something in him - the real presence of God we can call it - leads us to see the truth. The seed has been sown. If we can tend and nurture it, it will grow and deepen into ever fuller knowledge of God.

For us as Christians it is above all the person of Christ who shows us the presence of God in our human make-up, and once we know it for ourselves we cannot but share it with others. There is a saying you have probably heard that faith is caught, not taught. No amount of explanation of why anyone should believe in God can make

them do so, but if they are in touch with people who know God and in whom that knowledge makes an apparent and attractive difference, they may be drawn to want to know him for themselves. It is the simple invitation, 'Come and see,' that Jesus offers to the disciples in the Sunday Gospel reading, and that is an invitation we can make to others to see in us and in his Church God incarnate in Christ.

Even more vital, then, are our times of attention to God, nurturing the seed of his presence in us, not just for our own sake so that others may be drawn to *Come and see*. We have begun a New Year full of doubt and uncertainty, fear and misgiving, but full also of new hope - and the greatest hope is always that God will continue to be God and will be leading us through our ordinary time to the extraordinary truth of his unfailing love for us and all creation.

Wishing you every blessing,

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