

Dear Friends,

The first time I ever went to Kew Gardens it happened to be the height of the crocus season. Some years ago 5 million crocus bulbs were planted in one corner of the gardens, and for about two weeks or so in early spring they come up and make a glorious display - a great carpet of blues and whites and pinks. To see it at its finest you have to be there at exactly the right time, almost to the day, and on that visit by coincidence it was the right time. I have never seen it like that again, and I think a lot of the bulbs have now died off, so the display is never as fine as it used to be.

The emergence of the crocuses lasts for only a very short period of the year: for eleven months they are hidden underground, and I have sometimes wondered what they are doing all that time. Not a sensible question really; of course they are not doing anything, but in some way they are preparing or being prepared for that brief burst of glory - once seen, never forgotten.

On the fifth Sunday of Lent this year we have the Gospel reading in which Jesus says, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies it yields a rich harvest.' The seed must be planted and hidden underground if it is to be broken down and germinate and emerge into new life. This is the way of nature, and so it is with our human life. We too must go down into the darkness, allow ourselves to be broken down and die so that we can come out into the new life of resurrection. This is the way that Jesus marked out for us, and so it is the only way for we who share human-divine life in him.

The last week of Lent and the following Holy Week are sometimes known as Passiontide, the period recalling the suffering of Jesus. He was made to go through some very dark places, encountering all the evil and violence that the human world can bring forth. By allowing it to happen to him he so to speak nails it all to the cross in himself, being lifted up from the earth to draw all people to himself, as he also says.

The word Passion comes from a Latin word meaning to suffer or undergo. It is not something we choose, but something done to us which we can only accept and endure, but this endurance is not passive in the usual sense of that term, it is something we can almost embrace knowing that it is not the last word, but only the necessary prelude to future greatness and glory.

We need to be careful in saying this, because we can easily believe that God somehow inflicts suffering on us, to test us as we say, to see what we are made of, if our faith in him will survive the ordeal. I have had it said to me, as perhaps you have, that God will never *give* you more suffering than you can bear, but if it were the case that God arranges things to make us suffer he would not be an all-good loving Father, but an inhuman monster. To embrace our passion is not to rejoice in having a hard time, because it will toughen us up and strengthen our faith, it is accepting that this is the way - and the only way - by which we can come through to newness of life and love. We embrace it in that spirit, and not for what it is in itself.

Jesus says, 'anyone who loves his life in this world loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life,' - again words that can be disastrously misunderstood. People have sometimes imagined that God takes pleasure in our deliberately inflicting pain on our bodies in order to associate ourselves with Jesus on the cross. But if we are created by God as we are, to be physical persons, how could a loving God want us to do this? Life itself will in any case have plenty of suffering in store for us, of various kinds, without creating it ourselves. We will go down into the darkness many times over in the course of one lifetime, but each time it will prepare us that bit more for our final flowering into God's new life, sharing the glory of his risen Son.

To hate your life in this world is not to despise your God-given human nature and try to do it down, but it is more recognising that a lot of what we think is our self is falsehood and illusion, which can involve us in evil and darkness. It is letting go of the false self in order to know the true self, the presence of God at the centre of our human being, God who is eternal life. So we must let go of the life we have here and now, not because it is bad but because it can be constricted and distorted by the worldly world, if we are to know the eternal life of God's kingdom which knows no limitations or conditions. The kingdom is not a place, but rather a way of being, which is outside time and space. The brief glorious flowering of the crocuses is only a sign of the radiance of God's glory we hope to enjoy - the way to which Jesus has marked out for us.

A Benedictine abbot whose work I enjoy, John Chapman of Downside (he died in 1933) was devoted to a work by the French writer, Jean-Pierre de Caussade called *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, in which he suggests that we should not just acquiesce in whatever happens to us at each moment, but will it for ourselves as we know that God is in that moment and so what happens is his will for us. Our acquiescing is therefore not passive but active. Chapman insisted that this attitude should prevail especially at the moment of our death. On his final day the monk who was with him reminded Chapman that he used to say this. The account goes, "Yes," he said at length, after a long silence. "That is true, quite true. If God sees best for me to die, what in the world should one wish to live for?"

A superhuman degree of faith? Maybe, but all of us are called to let go of our life in this world so that we can come to know our true life in God. The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus is the way - it is ours too.

Wishing you every blessing in Passiontide,

Fr. Robin

robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk