

Dear Friends,

It is strange the things that stick in one's memory. On a trip to the Holy Land one of the places we visited was the modern town of Nablus in the West Bank, known in Biblical times as Shechem, also as Sychar, where Jesus met the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well. There is an ancient well now contained within a Greek Orthodox church said to be *the* well and we certainly went to see it, but I remember best the hospitality given to us afterwards by the Catholic parish and especially the delicious tangerines they provided at lunch - intensely sweet and with that distinctive flavour that tangerines have, not quite matched by any other citrus fruits. As you might gather, I am very fond of tangerines! And why not? The gifts of creation are many and various, and given to us above all by God to enjoy.

The parish of Nablus is named after the local saint Justin, whose feast day is June 1st. He was a distinguished scholar and student of theology and philosophy, who, once he had decided that the way of Christ was the right one to follow, was faithful to it to the point of giving his life, suffering martyrdom about the year 165 A.D. That was in Rome, where he had opened a school for further studies and where he wrote works in defence of the Christian religion. They include one of the earliest accounts we have of the Mass in the early church, showing that it had much the same form that we know today.

I read an article about St. Justin last week which said something I had not known before, that he regarded Greek philosophers who lived long before Christ as Christian. He argued that since the Word of God, what St. John calls the Logos and that we identify with Christ, the second person of the Trinity, was with God in the beginning, before the birth of Christ at Bethlehem, and since the Logos is the source of all truth, anything that human beings conceive of that is true comes from the Logos, who is Christ. In that sense Socrates who died in 399 B.C. and Heraclitus, who was around two centuries before that, since they said things Justin regards as true can be called Christian! - not so much as members of the Church, but as people who are in touch with the truth of God in Christ.

A commentary I saw says of Justin that 'in contrast to the Hebrew tendency to view God as making revelations to them and to no-one else, he follows the parable of the Sower, and sees God as sowing the seed of wisdom throughout the world, to grow wherever the soil would receive it. When we dispute with people who disagree with us, we would well to assume that they too are seeking wisdom and have found truth of a kind. Since there is only one God

and one Truth, it is our task not to contradict or belittle their achievement, but to show them how their strivings and searches are ultimately fulfilled in Christ. This is harder to do - not least because we have to take the trouble to understand *our own* faith thoroughly - but is ultimately more worthwhile.'

Justin is talking about beliefs, theories and doctrines, but equally, if not more important is the way we live our lives in the light of what we believe. Here too we can say that since God is the source of all love, truth and goodness, all that we encounter in the world of love, truth and goodness comes from God, even if it is found in people who do not and would not want to acknowledge him.

I have, for example, sometimes talked to parents (more particularly mothers) who are distressed because they brought up their children in the faith, but now that they are grown up they have drifted away from the Church and no longer practise. The parents nearly always go on to say, however, that their children are good people: they work hard, they look after their families and children well, they are ready to do anyone a good turn. I want to say that although they seem to have given up on God, all this shows that God has not given up on them. The goodness in them is the work of God. We would like them to acknowledge that and return to the Church, and can pray that they will, but the question remains, what really matters? saying you believe this or that, or living a Christ-like life?

One of my favourite little quotes from Scripture is from the prophet Micah:

*This is what the Lord God asks of you, only this:  
To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.*

When I read this I think there must be countless numbers of people doing what God asks of them without explicitly knowing him, and I also wonder how much of the forms and practices of religion we need in order to live as God wants us to.

When you do know God, believe in him and want to follow, it does of course give an added richness and depth to your life, and enables you to centre yourself on him more surely. The point of religion is to help us to live well - in a deep, rich, fulfilled way - and everything we do as the Church has that aim. This Sunday we are celebrating Corpus Christi, God's gift to us of himself in the body and blood of his Son. Receiving Christ in this way, we become more Christ-like: our lives take on a purpose, an orientation of leading us more and

more to the centre which is God. We do need to keep reminding ourselves, however, that the worship of the Church, including the Mass, is not so much an end in itself, something we do for its own sake alone, but a means whereby we give glory to God because we believe that he is at the centre and want to be in touch with him, so that we are able to do what he asks of us.

Faith is a great adventure. It is a launching into the deep, though not into the unknown, since we and countless others do have real knowledge of God. It is not, however, perfect knowledge yet, and will raise as many questions as it answers. If it is true faith it will enable us to live with the questions without being disabled by them. How do bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ? By transubstantiation, we say, or by the action of the Holy Spirit, but these terms are not really an answer. We might still ask how does the Spirit effect the change. What spiritual/biological/chemical processes are involved? If we could give a complete answer to that it would be immensely complicated, and perhaps would not in any case do us much good. We need to give ourselves first to God in love in order to come to some understanding of what we believe about him, and our understanding must in the nature of things always be limited, provisional. I think people who do not believe in God will be more impressed by honest doubt in believers than by pretended certainty.

God is a mystery, who goes beyond our understanding, so that there is always more of him for us to know and experience. It is good, therefore, to keep a sense of the mystery of God and in its light continue the journey of faith. One of the Greek philosophers Justin called Christian because of his perceptions of divine truth, Heraclitus, who lived about the same time as Isaiah, has this saying:

*To men and women some things are just and others unjust,  
but to God all things are good and beautiful and just.*

If you think about it, that must be true, though hard for us to comprehend. That is why above all we need faith, which is far more a matter of commitment than it is of certainty.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.