

Monday in Holy Week 2020 (A)

Summary: The perfume of a life well lived.

Confinement might spice Holy Week, giving us additional time to consider not just what is important in life but what our life is about. Not just what we worry about but the purpose and meaning of worry. Some anxiety has been expressed by clergy in England online about how given the current changed circumstances without their buildings they can express precious facets of Christian faith and witness to the sacred, the transcendent, the sublime.

Because our contemporary world has a problem with the Christian world view of what is holy, what is true and beautiful. With the shifting of time and the development of industrial society what we have come to treasure and regard as treasure has changed. Charles Taylor writes,

If God's purpose for us is imply that we flourish, and we flourish by judicious use of industry and instrumental reason, then what possible use could he have for a Saint Francis, who in a great élan of love calls on his followers to dedicate themselves to a life of poverty? At best, this must lower the GNP, by withdrawing these mendicants from the work-force; but worse, it can lower the morale of the productive. Better to accept the limitations of our nature as self-loving creatures and make the best of it.¹

In our world, shaped by the experience of total war and the devastation it wreaks, transformed too by the technological changes that enabled *Les Trente Glorieuses* in French society to erect a great gulf standing between us and our grandparents, there is much to celebrate. But there remains a question in human experience, Taylor again, 'The horizon of transformation, in particular in relation to our life here, recedes.'² What is the best sort of human life, what is most fulfilling, most joyful, making us most ourselves?

We have all sorts of helps towards a life without psychological, economic, physical or spiritual pain but still we struggle for a vision of human life in all its fullness that can be called the glory of God, that can be a cause of joy to us or to the God who created and holds all in being..

There are all sorts of responses to this question of the ultimate human identity. In Dostoevsky's *The Devils* Kirilov appears perfectly detached and open and aware of eternity. Contemplating a leaf turning yellow in autumn he believes, if he were to die of his own free will at such a moment, he would achieve true freedom, ultimate freedom – that he would achieve God-hood. At the chosen moment he kills himself – and is dead, only dead. The paradox is that the yearning for the absolute, the yearning to be God, just destroys itself becoming lethal. The tragic outworking of this – for our prayers - people will be saying especially under the pressures of Confinement 'I loved her too much. I murdered her'; 'He was my everything, that's why I hurt him'.

As you know I live above the shop and at 8pm I clap out of my window with the other two inhabitants or three (if Madam opposite comes out too) left in our block. I've been touched when shopping by the care that the shopkeepers take for our health, by the respect shown to the regulations that we hope will flatten the curve of infection and save lives. I'm touched because I believe it demonstrates that what lies at the core of being human is more than the

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2007), p230

² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p261.

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'self-discipline, quiet good-humoured resolve and...fellow-feeling' that Queen Elizabeth described last night. It is a sense that we are all precious and in some way connected to the infinite in ways we struggle even to comprehend.

Quite a lot to pack into a queue for the boulangerie but let me explain! In Tolkien's *The Hobbit* we hear this exchange between the Wizard Gandalf and the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins of Baggins End.

Gandalf: I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone.

Bilbo: I should think so – in these parts! We're plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can't think what anybody sees in them.

And it was true, that Bilbo was disturbed and very uncomfortable and was many times late for his dinner on the adventure. But in the adventure he became truly himself. Not a category, a caricature or cypher but himself. A hobbit like no other but fully – broken, remade and imperfect – fully himself. Like the Mary in today's gospel. We know nothing of her - and in the Western Church we wrongly confuse her with the Woman caught in Adultery – except that she was wealthy, unmarried, that she was determined to spend the limited time available to her fully in the presence of Jesus, that she had the strength of character to defy convention and wipe the feet of Jesus with her hair.

We don't know what sort of life she had led to bring her to that place in today's readings where she was fully herself – fully alive in God – and able to make this sign of Jesus's impending death and burial. But it wasn't because she was 'self-actualising', communicating as 'adult to adult', she wasn't seeking her own fulfilment to make the most of herself; though I would argue all of these were true. She was being herself in that moment and as a consequence the whole house was filled with the fragrance of her perfume.

You may have seen the film *Des Hommes et des Dieux* about a community of Cistercian monks in Algeria in the mid-1990's. As they went about what God wanted of them in the midst of the dreadful conflict the Prior said to the youngest monk who was struggling...

'I think that each of us discovered that to which Jesus Christ beckons us. It's to be born. Our identities as people go from one birth to another. And from each birth to birth we'll end up bringing to the world the child of God that we are.

This week we'll as we trust in the Spirit to lead us into the fullness of Resurrection life at Easter. As we seek to discover afresh the real life that God has prepared for us. As we decide what we take and what we can let go on our adventure in God. Let us take a moment to breathe in the fragrance of the perfume of integrity, wholeness and holiness.

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