

Springtime:

A Leap in the Dark - Into the Heart of God

If we don't transform our hurts, we project them on to a cycle of negativity. At breakfast one morning during our holidays my mother tells us the dream she has just woken up from; She dies and goes to heaven, dragging two bulging suitcases labelled "Good Deeds." She rings the bell of God's door. No answer. While waiting, she checks her precious baggage, her passport to heaven. The suitcases seem to have grown smaller. Anxiously she presses the bell again. Still no answer. Once more she checks her suitcases. They have now disappeared completely. Utterly distraught, she flees in confusion from the one place she has spent her life trying to reach.

As we piled on the marmalade we discussed the dream. Was it telling our mother that Christian commitment is not about banking up "good deeds" so as to wrest (yet again) redemption from God? Is it, we wondered, more of a commitment to authenticity?

Unhealthy religion can add to our ambivalence. It can hide us from ourselves and from God. Instead of stripping us bare of our veneer of pride to a condition of complete simplicity, the external practice of religion places us in the role of the Scribes – undoubtedly do-gooders, but who were so proud of their good deeds.

Each morning we need to surrender our lives completely into the heart of God, as a bulb in the dark clay. This surrender is of the essence of all great faiths. It is the dark leap. It has a raw and scary quality about it. Even Jesus hesitated. Most of us, too, shy away from such a challenge. Yet without that initial, blind and extreme act of trust, repeated as often as possible every day for as long as we live, all other routine rituals and pastoral performances will only, at best, boost our ego, at worst, poison our soul. Jesus' words to the Pharisees still chill the hearts of those who are open enough to see and feel the shocking edge of his sharp insight. He hated clerical hypocrisy. In truth, Jesus had little interest in religion at all, or in the trappings of it. His passion was for the utter authenticity of people's lives. Before embarking on the hard journey of life-long marriage, of encountering an addiction, of climbing an Everest, the commitment must be total, passionate and non-negotiable. Otherwise the story, and the journey, will be short and sad.



There is a costly apprenticeship to discipleship. Thomas Merton once said that he would work with his novices towards achieving surrender only when they stopped slamming doors. There is little point, he felt, in pondering the heights of self transcendence with those who are not yet aware of the first steps into sensitive living. Everyone is equally graced. Surrendered hearts are found among members of all religions and none. To be sure, we need the Churches. But the warnings of Jesus must burn in our hearts. The moment the Churches begin to believe in themselves more than in the Spirit entrusted to them, believing that they are chosen where others are not, then they are confusing institutional elitism with working for the Kingdom.

As another year gets under way, today there is a real burst of spring with the feast of St. Brigid 'Muire na nGael' (Mary of the Irish), it is so important to reflect on these things, carpe diem. In our anxieties we forget the "one thing necessary," to enjoy that vibrant sense of freedom through a blessed trusting and a single-minded focus on the divine love in the very centre of our lives. Our in-house preoccupation with liturgical incidentals, and our religious rivalries about who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, have little to do with a God who just wants to love us, who waits for us to risk returning that love.

"Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way, it will still be muck," a Hasidic teaching reminds us.

"In the time you are brooding, you could be on your way, stringing pearls for the delight of heaven."

“Love and do what you will,” wrote St. Augustine.

Jesus came to reveal the power of true, human love. The surrender to love will never lead us astray. And the power of that surrender releases the energy of God. St Thérèse of Lisieux never doubted this. She begged to be “overwhelmed by the flood of God’s grace”

If anyone surrendered and took Jesus at his word it was St Francis, stripped bare of everything, inside and out. There is a drastic finality about the surrender of Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier, Gandhi, to reach, touch and comfort the “little ones” of the Kingdom. And likewise with all the saints we notice around us every day, who quietly surrender their lives in the call of loving service.

Whether we are Carmelites living our days and nights in silence, or Princes of the Church spending our time defending the faith, or daily Mass-goers, or the millions who never darken the door of a religious institution, it is the same journey for all – the journey of love, the call to surrender, the breaking down of our thinly disguised appetite for power, prestige and possessions, the awareness of our hidden jealousy, petty resentment and ever so-subtle pride.

Every human saint, religious or not, will have moved beyond the “pursuit of perfection stage,” the reward/punishment incentive, into another place less limited by flawed motivation and religious constraints. We have to spring the traps of unredeemed religious expectation, where most of us are unknowingly held, before another horizon swings into view.

“Out beyond right and wrong there’s a field,” wrote Rumi. “I’ll meet you there.” Only surrender!

“If you trust the river of life,” wrote Krishnamurti, “the river of life has an astonishing way of taking care of you.”

There can be no other way for us Christians to experience the abundant life before we die; no other way to do God’s will; no other way to be broken and refashioned like the surrendered Jesus on the terrible Cross; no other way to flesh again the wonderful Word of truth into our Church which, in its necessary human fallibility, is always losing its way.

There is something bold and breathtaking in the vision of Jesus. It is to understand this that we are created. And whatever elitist reasons we may have for our claims to special treatment by the God of truth, without the hard winter of personal and communal surrender, we will never carry the beginnings of spring or honest light of the summer sun. We must enter the future fields of freedom not proudly through guarded gates with our special passes, but humbly, on our knees, in a company of fellow failures, quite unable to believe how, in our sins, we are so undeservedly loved and utterly cherished by a tearful, smiling God; A God who cannot resist the surrendered heart.

