

November 2011

Horizons of the Heart

We are called into the deep by God's dream for us



Recently, I took a walk along the prom here at Blundellsands. The crisp dry November evening brought families out, to stroll, fly kites and generally enjoy this beautiful Sunday, here was I, among my new neighbours. It felt good. However, as time went on, in the far distance, my attention was drawn to what seemed to be a stately vessel resting on the deeps, it was set against a backdrop of the faintest pastel hues at onset of sunset. As I paused to take in this sight, something vaguely familiar, within me stirred as I remembered the call of our Saviour to launch out into the deep. Something within us – a voice that calls to us like a far wave – is always beckoning us anew towards our constant, but often forgotten destiny. That destiny is God's dream for us from the beginning.

There are many ways of launching into the deep. There are moments in our lives when the yearning for radical change becomes especially intense. This insistent whisper may not be immediately recognised by everyone. But, given the divine source of our true essence, I suspect that it is always there. Something within us, maybe at the most unlikely times, and at our deepest and most hidden levels, keeps convincing us and often with a relentless urgency, of distant but reachable horizons.

Is this what John Paul II was referring to when, before he died, he urged us to take risks? *Duc in altum*. Is it true to say that without this desire, whether faint or focused, we are stuck in a stagnant religion, dammed-up in a fairly infantile faith? So many believers are corralled into a programmed and seemingly safe way of being Christian. Yet, almost paradoxically, it is only in a deeply rooted faith that we find the source and summit of this silent yearning for a richer, and more risky way of following the call of our hearts. Our churches have still within them faithful people who are burning with an unconscious longing to fly into other skies.

I'm a Capricorn. On my wall is a picture of a determined looking goat midway through a huge leap across a terrifying chasm. As I was completing my recent move to my present home, I paused before it every day, because that is where I found myself during those months of my life – looking for a place to land. At the point of the launching out into the unknown, to another way of ministering as a priest, the secret was not in looking downwards or backwards, or losing heart.



In the transitions of our lives, there is a fatal attraction to the void below. There is such a safety about the familiar routines that they provide us with a false identity. It is unavoidable, then, in our pursuit of authenticity, that our ego should spread anxious panic. But the felt fear only testifies to the risk we are taking and the courage we are embracing. We will always be tempted to doubt, to look down, and to look back. There have been times in all the crossing-places of my own life when I battled with the cautioning tapes of parents, teachers and priests still turning in my head. It was then that I wanted to return to the safety of the status quo, to retrace my steps back down along the slow paths of my recent ascent, where the embers of the previous evenings' camp-fires were still warm.

When I listen to the hidden dreams of ordinary, healthy people I often wonder whether this persistent compulsion for greater and finer things burns in every human heart. (A recent review reveals that millions of Britons – over a quarter of all 30 - 50 year olds – are currently considering such an option, even though in most cases it involves a decrease in income.) All kinds of counter-attractions – loss of nerve, negative judgements and jealous comments – can numb out and dampen down that first God-given spark that is always waiting to be fanned into a fiercer flame. But that spark, I believe, can never be extinguished. God's imagination is incarnate within us. It is not easily overcome. 'Creative minds have always been known to survive any kind of bad training,' wrote Anna Freud. The anthropologist Mary Daly reminds us that the creative potential itself in human beings is the enfleshed restlessness of the deity. It is important to believe that we all carry within our bodies and hearts God's own dissatisfaction with the closed, lukewarm and safe ways of living. The whole thrust of every moment of Jesus' life was towards a passion for the possible.

I have come to believe that when we struggle to discern the pros and cons of making a leap into the unknown, there is a sense in which some part of us has made the move already. Something, in fact, has already happened upfront at the boundaries of our life where the burning is brightest. A part of us has already crossed over into that as yet unknown space. It is waiting for the other parts of us to catch up. 'You must give birth to your images,' wrote the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, 'They are the future waiting to be born. Fear not the strangeness you feel. The future must enter into you long before it happens.' We have always carried the vague shape of a potential destiny somewhere within us – in our memory, in the unconscious, touched on in some of our more profound experiences. In an ultimate sense, I suppose that this is nowhere more true than in the intimations of our immortality that may strike us during these November days. We suddenly and fleetingly sense that a distant homecoming has already happened.



Is there, I wonder, something of immense importance hidden in the least of the aspirations of our lives? Antonio Machado, the Spanish poet, wrote, 'Anyone who moves onwards, even a little, Walks, like Jesus, on the water.' Yet my own experience of walking on water resembles more the embarrassing misfortune of Peter than the quiet elegance of Jesus. To step out of the boat of our secure lives on to a precarious surface that may not hold our weight is a very foolhardy thing to do. Crossing a new terrain, to do a new work, is never a safe option. But once you begin to know yourself, to feel the shape of your soul, to have one courageous conversation with your true essence, then you have no choice. We are divinely created for growth; fashioned from the very beginning to become like God. That is why, to have heard the whisper of that call coming to you, is already to have answered.

When I take the risks of change, when I jump out of the boat like Peter, in spite of the grim, relentless tapes of caution that spin around in my memory, something deeper is there too. It is an intimation that I am always safely held. Our God-created nature guards us well. I take and hold the one hand that I know belongs in mine. So did Peter. And so did Jesus. Everything sustains your courage when your reach exceeds your grasp; when you step where you have never stepped before. This is when, in the words of the Yorkshire poet David Whyte, 'We place our identity at the edge of discovery'. It is time to move from an old life, before some kind of numbness sets in, making transition impossible. We die too soon when our work has no grace in it, no surprise, no inspiration, when it only maintains and bolsters up a soulless system. When our work is creative, the invisible becomes visible. But of this be sure: it will not be easy and some folk will not understand. However, we are called by God's dream for us into the deep and then homeward to safe harbour. I wonder, as I write, if our stately vessel, after her long voyage, berthed safely in Merseyside on Sunday evening past sunset.

