

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 3rd July Against an Infinite Horizon

Every human heart, religious or not, is on a universal pilgrimage to God

As I listen to people these days, I often hear talk of pilgrimage; perhaps the Camino de Compostella, Walsingham, Knock, Glendalough or Lourdes. This touches something deep within myself and unveils a memory back to a time when I was on a parish pilgrimage to Lourdes.

I was alone for a moment, on the ferry home, half-way between Calais and Dover. It was Sunday morning and the sun was shining on the green-blue sea. As spring turns to summer, millions travel to Lourdes. Our own parish pilgrimage was almost over. Our hearts were full of stories of pain and joy, of some dark moments and many bright ones, of shared secrets, and glimpses of the mystery and paradox of the human spirit.

And those famous white cliffs were coming into view, Dorothy, one of our doctors, joined me for a chat. Very apologetically, and trustingly, she admitted to having some difficulty in 'buying into' the legend of Lourdes, not to mention its commercial and materialistic trappings. I cannot say that I was shocked at hearing this. There is, I feel sure, a doubting Thomas lurking in all of us. Our finest saints were racked by doubts for long, empty years. Even Jesus himself, on the cross, may have died in a lonely winter of the spirit.

Whether we travel to Lourdes, then, to relieve the pain of those less able, as Dorothy did, or because we ourselves are desperate for healing, as I was, our nagging questions can draw us into deeper truth. It is possible to be part of the mystery of Lourdes at a very fundamental level of experience. Because our human condition is never complete, there is, deep in our souls, a yearning for wholeness. From all time, and in all cultures and religions, people carry within them a searching for the transcendent, a quest for God, like an unfinished symphony.

From the very beginning, people on pilgrimage carry lighted candles and other symbols of enduring hope, like we did, at the Torchlight and Blessed Sacrament processions; they bathe in water like we did at the Baths, or bless themselves, like we did, with drops from the green river; they touch the rocks of Mother Earth as we did at the Cave; they sing and chant familiar refrains, like we did to the rhythm of the Rosary; they take off their shoes when they are on holy ground like we did, to have our tired feet anointed; they kiss the icons and images of their salvation like we did, and like our departed Pope did, during his many visits to his beloved Lourdes, when he knelt down to kiss the dust of the world's pilgrims – the dust from which we came and to which we will all return.

At Lourdes they tell stories of how, one day, God's mother appeared to a country girl, and of how the lives of visitors, for a century and a half, have been changed for ever. Each religion of the world has its own version of this story. Deep down, we all sense a belonging in that universal human journey. Every morning and evening, as we found our place in that winding, evocative procession of light, we sensed our solidarity with the innumerable pilgrimages of people around the world, journeying through existential darkness, trusting in the power of their own deities, and of their own holy lights, to guide them safely to their destination.

Lourdes is not the place for proofs and certainties. It is foolish to be too dogmatic when dealing with mystery. We are best advised, when approaching the unknown, to do so on our knees. It is enough to know that our own personal stories are held within the greater story of God. With our sisters and brothers across the nations, we, at the foot of the Pyrenees, felt humble, vulnerable and grateful.

And maybe that is why, at our daily times of sharing, some shy paradoxes emerged. We, the giving helpers, began to realise that, truly, we were the receivers, too. The roles were somehow reversed. Even though we, the able-bodied, were the ones who walked behind the wheelchairs of our physically less able sisters and brothers, we were the emotionally disabled ones who so desperately needed healing through the love and acceptance of our 'guests'. Within our group there were many stories told of such 'small revelations'. Beyond the limitations of denominations, Lourdes, we agreed, is not the place for wearing masks.

Perhaps then, among its many other graces, Lourdes can be experienced as an opportunity and an invitation to join our sisters and brothers of the world over, in the journey of their souls, in the rituals of death and life, of despair and hope, of pain and joy, especially when we gathered around the universal elements of bread and wine.

Lourdes is the world in microcosm, the church in miniature. All of life is there. It is open to all who are searching for meaning, for healing, for wholeness. It asks for no spiritual passport, no certificate of worthiness, nor official invitation. If you are hungry, the table is set just for you. If your wounded heart is open, it will be healed. Beyond historical facts and fictions, beyond proofs and doubts, beyond disposable kitsch and artistic treasures, one can hear at Lourdes – and at all the sacred places of divine incarnations across our planet – the voice of a passionate God saying, 'Because I love you so much, I only want to heal you.'

At Lourdes, that metropolis of teeming and intense emotion, everything is turned around. It is a place of divine contradiction, of ultimate questions. Who are the valuable members of our society? What are its core values? Are we all driven by unworthy motives? What, or who, will bring us to our senses – before it is too late? The essence of Lourdes is a humbling experience for many of us. We begin again to realise that we cannot control God, or fashion God to our own specifications. God, by definition, is always different, always bigger than our creeds and churches. In his Orthodoxy, G. K. Chesterton wrote about the Catholic ability to hold opposites, doubts and contradictions together. Mystery and tradition are big enough to cope with conflict and paradox. The reasons for our hope are not based on a defined certainty, but on a huge trust in, and respect for, divine freedom.

There is a sense in which God's healing, then, can never be confined to one story, one place or one moment. No one belief system holds the monopoly of divine compassion. There will always be a wild extravagance about God's amazing obsession with us. In Faber's beloved hymn (1855), we remember that 'There's a wideness in God's mercy/Like the wideness of the sea.'

For the Christian, a miraculous light shone over Bethlehem. It shines on, especially in the marvellous events that happen at Lourdes. But for millions of this planet's pilgrims, the miracles of our great and saving God are not confined to any one place. Against the infinite horizon of a totally free and utterly unlimited Lover, against a sky of a million bright lights, the Christian star finds its true and perfect setting.