

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 25th July

Beauty of Being Human

The mirror was as big as the wall of the room we were gathered in. It was my first Pilates class. Half way through I caught a glimpse of myself writhing on the floor, arms and legs all over the place like a beached octopus. Around me flexible bodies rotated rhythmically on their mats, balancing, stretching and pulsing to the music and the instructions. Sweat was dripping off my chin. My limbs were hurting. And so too was my ego, appalled at the truth of the mirror on the wall.

The pressure to be perfect is driven by deep influences - from the ego-vanity within and from marketing-forces without. The beauty-image industry is worth billions, its compelling promises often maintained by unhealthy and unnatural means. The weekly magazines and supplements play havoc with people's vulnerability, insecurity and desperation, relentlessly pushing magic diets, cosmetics and expensive fitness regimes.

The media eye objectifies all of us; every day we are reminded of how inadequate we are. Then we begin to objectify ourselves. Deeply dissatisfied we assume a false persona. But that betrayal forgets the Christian story. Our faith is not about becoming more religious. Our work and goal is to experience, nourish and appreciate the divine beauty of our true humanity, no matter what form it takes.

Teilhard de Chardin reminded us that we are not human beings struggling to become spiritual; we are spiritual beings in pursuit of authentic humanity. What is meant by this? From before our birth we are, in essence, full of God's dream for us, God's seed. Then starts our journey of growing into real and true human beings, into the very likeness of God.

That is why we celebrate the feast of Pentecost as the birthday and validation of incarnate Christianity. In his *The Eternal Year* theologian Karl Rahner writes that 'we can no longer say what a human being is if we omit the fact that God's own self is humanity's possession . . . that is the glad tidings of Pentecost.' He sees Pentecost as the completing of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus - therefore a time for remembering who we really are, where we really belong, and what we are called to be and to do.

Common humanity is the home of God. How we live it is everything. The tragedy is that we have forgotten this core of our faith. In *Dominum et vivificantem* (1986) Pope John Paul II wrote that 'the image and likeness of God, which man is from his very beginning, is fully realised and revealed in the Incarnation . . .' Our humanity, in all its individual shapes and sizes, Thomas Merton assures us, is God's way of fleshing and manifesting the divine beauty.

And later, in his *Theology of the Body* (1997) John Paul included a wonderfully revealing statement: 'The human body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible, the spiritual, the divine, the very presence of God . . .' If any truth is capable of healing our body-hatred, of transforming our self-image, then surely those words will succeed. And our living role-model for a deeper self-awareness is, of course, Jesus himself, the Human One.

In *Dr Zhivago* Russian novelist Boris Pasternak referred to the 'flea-pit' that was Rome, to the degrading excesses that blinded people to their true worth as they debased themselves before false gods. 'And then,' he matchlessly wrote, 'into this tasteless heap of gold and marble, he came, light-footed and clothed in light, with his marked humanity, his deliberate Galilean provincialism, and from that moment there were neither gods or peoples, there was only one man - man the carpenter, man the ploughman, man the shepherd with his flock of sheep at sunset . . . At that moment gods and nations ceased to be, and Mankind came into being.'

And into the flea pits and sins of our lives too, steps a man who is sorely tempted and distressed, who is transfigured by the light of his humanity, who breaks the laws and builds the bridges, who entered and harrowed hell. Each Sunday's Gospel tells of a compassionate man who revealed God through his human senses, by the way he looked, listened, spoke and touched, a man who was all too human for many.

But there was a deeper dimension to the humanity of Jesus. Michael Buckley SJ compared the death of Jesus with that of another celebrated human being, Socrates. After much reflection, Buckley believed that Jesus' humanity was the weaker of the two. Socrates went to his death with calmness and serenity. Jesus was deeply distressed, fearful, agitated and dependent. Before his death Socrates was interiorly at peace, utterly stoical. Jesus, in the Garden, was in pieces, vulnerable, humiliated, wracked by pain, pleading for companionship. Commenting on Buckley's study Fr Ronald Rolheiser writes, 'In contemporary language Socrates was simply better set together as a human being than Jesus was . . .'

When Socrates drank the hemlock, in his integrated self-possession, he looked awesome. When Jesus drank the vinegar, in his blood and tears, he looked awful. And yet, who was the more human of the two? Socrates' perfection was in his astonishing and courageous control of every situation. The perfection of Jesus' humanity lay in the way he intensely felt and outwardly expressed his powerlessness, emptiness and grief. Great love demands great suffering. His humanity shone with both. And here is the image we seek, already within us, waiting to be recognised and set free.

It was to be inextricably a part of us that God became human, present, embodied. The seeds of our true image were sown in Creation, nourished in evolution, consecrated in Incarnation, fleshed in humanity and made accessible forever in bread and wine. So that we will never forget our origins, destiny and true identity, our divine-human bodies and their senses are forever remembered as 'temples of the Holy Spirit' in every Baptism, perennially celebrated as wind, fire and light at every Pentecost, and consumed as 'who we already are' at every Mass. (*Tablet Article*)