

Week Beginning 4th January 2016

Discerning Our True North

The beginning of a new year has a way of calling us to reflect on the depth and direction of our inner realities, looking beyond the obvious, searching below the surface. We ask ourselves questions about what is superficial about our lives and what is of lasting value. Are we being seduced by false gods? 'People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success,' wrote monk and mystic Thomas Merton, 'only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.'

A national daily has been inviting readers to write their own obituary as a way of reaching into their most real desires. 'Who and what has meant the most to you?'; 'What life-experiences were most transformative for you?'; 'What wisdom would you like to leave behind?' These are soul-sized questions that concern the meaning and purpose of our lives, the discernment of the misty but abiding horizon we call our 'true north'.

Lutheran theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer kept asking himself these questions to sustain his spirit and his faith during his imprisonment and eventual execution by the Nazis in the First World War. When Michael Mayne, Dean Emeritus of Westminster Abbey was suffering severely from ME and facial cancer, he wrote his last and beautiful book 'The Enduring Melody'. The title is taken from Bonhoeffer's phrase *cantus firmus* - the fluctuating, recurring melody of grace running through a person's life. They both spent their last most difficult hours refining and defining that silent, precious music.

Amidst the distortions and cul-de-sacs of our lives, is there within us any distant refrain about which we can say, with Mayne, '... this has been mine, and mine alone: however much I have deviated from it and chosen my own note-lengths, this is the ground bass. There are truths and experiences that have seized and shaped me, and it is this firm ground that speaks to me of what is authentic, and to which I can return at every stage of my unpredictable human journey?'

Mayne quotes from Bonhoeffer's 'Letters and Papers from Prison': 'God requires that we should love him eternally with our whole hearts; yet not so as to compromise or diminish our earthly affections, but as a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies provide a counterpoint ...'

How would you or I describe the persistent melody of our lives, the deepest wish in our hearts?? Will we be able to distinguish between the true and false self within, to discern our essence from our ego, to find our true north? The challenge for all of us, is to be realigned with our essential, inner divine image, re-healed, re-connected in our self-awareness, alert and vigilant enough to recognise the false seduction of 'fool's gold' for what it is.

There can be no authentic life without a conscious connection to an inner, innocent, unspoilt source where we were first kissed into life by a God who adores us.

Merton wished that all people could see 'the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are'

Do we ever reflect on these things? Do we think about the Source of our gifts, our desires, our restless searching – the inner life we share with our Creator? Do we know that a God exists who understands our ambiguous story, who, in spite of everything, always delights in us , who alone can give us the gift we has always longed for – the gift of our truest self?

