

Daniel's Reflection for week beginning 11th July – Drenched with Love

I have only one reason for being here. There's only one thing I want to say to you. One thing that changed my life – the day when I began to believe that God was utterly in love with me, that I was the apple of God's eye - a presumption? Dear people, the God I tried to believe in for the first half of my life, is not the God I believe in now. That old God of fear and penance, that hard God of anger and punishment and judgement - that God I no longer believe in. Because I was young and sensitive I suffered much guilt and scruples, rushing to re-join the confession queues because I had remembered some un-confessed triviality, or because I had a distraction while saying my penance. These experiences made it almost impossible for me, and by all accounts for many, many others, to say 'I love you with all my heart' to God.

My mother's love:

A few decades ago everything in my life began to change. An amazing grace possessed my heart. I discovered the face of the real God, a face full of tender love and affection. I do not know how this astonishing transformation happened. It had something to do, I think, with my certainty that my mother loved me totally when I was small. Are you surprised by this? But that's how God works! The tough God of the preachers began to fade away and no longer frightened me. I stopped worrying about sins and rushing to confession and wondering was I forgiven, and would I be punished, or would I get to heaven at all. Everything about God became drenched with love.

I just knew with a total certainty that God looks at all of us with a wonderful joy, a God who never punishes, who never created a hell or a limbo, who never banished us from any Garden, who cannot stop the atrocities that break our hearts, who delights in everything that delights us, who forever gazes at us with the look of love. A God who has already and always forgiven us for everything. Who is happy when we are happy; who weeps when we weep. Who never punishes anyone for anything.

The beautiful face of God:

You see, dear people, we are all made in God's beautiful image from the very beginning. We are not sinners in exile in a vale of tears; we are shining daughters and sons of a Mother-God who desires, from the very beginning, nothing but our well-being in this challenging, often very dark world. So please open your big hearts this very day in a way you may never have done before.

Pope Francis pleads with us to make this life-changing discovery. Start looking at the face of God in a new way during your hours here today and tomorrow, in this blessed place of grace. May we go home transformed with this stunning secret that we were really never told about. But we have always sensed that we were born to love and to be loved. Baptism tells us we are all prophetesses, priestesses and princesses. It is not about exorcising the devil from the pure, innocent and divine heart of a very small baby.

Pope Francis too has said the very same things as I'm saying to you now. He calls for a radical change in the Vatican leading to an emerging Church of much beauty; from an accusing, clerical language from Rome, to the 'tender voice of a mother'; let me sit down with them, he said, and listen and talk to them, regarding people who are hopelessly addicted, those considering an abortion, those who are gay and want to get married, those who are considering divorce, those who leave the Church – just the tender voice of a mother. He said we can never exaggerate the infinite extent of God's love. Ours is a very BIG God – infinitely bigger than we have ever imagined. God's love is wide and deep beyond all our knowing or experiencing or imagining. (2 Cor: 3,2)

May we feel that abundant life of being treasured and transformed right here and right now, on this October day at Carfin Shrine in Motherwell. And remember a central theme of these two days – 'God loves us unconditionally so that we can live life to the full'- every day, through every disappointment, every illness, every insult, every fear, every sin, every grace. To start living with a new confidence, a new zest for each day, and a new hope.

What about going to Communion?

Dear People of God, please believe what I'm saying. It may be difficult for most of us to see God in this utterly loving way. A crazy kind of love. The God of Jesus never judges us, welcomes all of us to his heart, to his Table – the very Table which is set especially for us sinners, the Table to which Jesus invites everyone of good will, without exception. All that is needed to go to Holy Communion is the hunger for it! (St Augustine). Nothing else. Just the desire for love. The longing to be free. The hunger to be cherished, to belong and to be safe. Let no one stop you going to Communion. Some of our past harsh teachings has made it almost impossible for us to believe in God's love, to trust in God, or to love God with all our hearts.

What about our wounds?

This is the time for us to become free from all that fear and to let divine love heal us from all guilt and shame, from feeling judged and condemned. And also to heal the intolerable anxiety, the mental illnesses and depression that is destroying the happiness of millions of us across the world these decades. God does not want us to suffer like that. We all have our bad patches but one in four of us have terribly dark times. Our beautiful and sensitive minds are healed by God's intense and compassionate love for us all – sin or no sin. But we have to believe that this is true. So never again let anyone place those burdens on your fragile shoulders. Never again let anyone make you doubt that God is madly in love with you. There is nothing you can do to make God love you less. Or love you more. It is an unconditional love.

Try to surrender your life and suffering completely to that beautiful God. That is how your wounds become sacred wounds. We cannot be truly human without some kind of suffering, some kind of cross of pain – mental, emotional, spiritual, physical - sometimes even the deepest loss and despair, in our lives. There is no exception. God holds us and weeps with us in our pain. And these are the times when God is closest of all to us. It is in our darkness that we really first begin to experience the grace of having to place all our trust in God, to surrender to the divine love and mercy. Otherwise we become bitter – and that is a terrible kind of way to go – a kind of graceless dying that makes our Saviour weep.

'O sacred Heart of Jesus I place all my trust in Your Love.' Keep repeating these blessed words in time of struggle, of darkness, of depression. 'I can do all things in him who makes me strong', said St Paul. And so can we. 'I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me'. All God wants is our health and happiness. Every morning I repeat some of these words, sometimes in desperation. Until sooner or later, a courage, a hope, a peace returns – sometimes for a day, a week, and then we usually have to begin all over again.

(Extract from a retreat Daniel gave at the National Shrine of Scotland to Our Lady of Lourdes at Carfin, Motherwell.)