

Week beginning 12th April - Lighten up

There are mornings when the left-over worries and unpleasant memories of yesterday's encounters are waiting at my bedside, to leap into my head and heart with their deadly whisperings, even though I had hoped they were lost in the night. It takes precious hours before I finally find the space to begin separating myself from the energy-draining cloud. I do this by asking to lighten up, to be more gentle with myself. I shake and lower my shoulders, take a few deep breaths and relax my face. . . So I pray for the gift of humour, of not taking my life too seriously, or realising how little I can do to control or predict it. 'How do you make God laugh hilariously?' 'Tell her your plans for yourself!'

. . .

One example of being saved by laughter was during an interview, be Radio Belfast, about *Lost Soul? The Catholic Church Today*. Towards the end of the allotted time, the interviewer's last question was, 'Father O'Leary, there may be bishops reading your book who would say it is yourself, and not the church, that stands in danger of losing your soul. What do you say to that?' In an instant I felt the tension of fear and panic rising up within me. How should I answer? Would I defend myself vehemently? Just at the moment when I was beginning to relax and feel good about my performance up to then, things had taken a very unexpected turn. But the interviewer, a true professional, had spotted my guard going down and, with elegant timing, had thrust the poisoned spear home. So much can pass through your mind in the time it takes to draw a breath. Something incongruous about the whole moment struck me forcibly. I began to laugh, easily and genuinely. 'What's so funny Father?' she asked. 'The bishops,' I replied, 'are probably right.' . . .

There is an affinity between laughter and humility. People who can laugh at themselves, even in the most serious circumstances, are usually down-to earth and very loveable. The Buddhists, and many of our own Christian mystics, have little doubt about the overall physical and psychic health and balance of energies that follow on a constant readiness for hearty laughing. This reflection is about becoming more aware of the power of laughing, especially at ourselves, in our lives, and to believe that whatever is bothering us today might benefit from, if not a huge belly-laugh, maybe a brave, spirited smile and a shrug of the shoulders. (*Travelling Light pp76, 77,78*)

Follow-up - If you would like to explore mindful meditation, try this simple daily praxis:

Light a candle today as you begin to pray. And, as a background for your meditation, play a little of your favourite music. Visualise your body as light and vibrant. Visualise it at play. As you breathe evenly and consciously, remember your favourite way of playing as a child . . . How can you bring a little play into your life today? Maybe a hop and a skip, or a quick shout (if you find yourself in a place with no people). . . You could go barefoot round the house more often than you do, or outside if the weather is fine. Sing a song from beginning to end, a little louder and with more gusto than normal. Trying to remember your childhood games is one thing; bringing your body into action with the memory of them is quite another.

There is a healing and wholeness in this kind of re-connecting. . . Create some simple, playful, even 'useless' activity every day. Break the mould of your Catholic work-ethic, of your childhood echoes of guilt, and dare to waste a little time today!