

Daniel's Reflection for week beginning 4th July – Is Now the Time to Change?

Maybe every 10 years or so there comes a time when we are ready, open to the Holy Spirit. And maybe for many of us, that time is NOW. Let's pray . . .

Dear God,

Help me to spread your beauty wherever I go today.

Flood my soul with your Spirit and light.

Fill my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of you.

Shine through me and be so in me, that every soul I meet with may see your presence in me.

Let them look up and see no longer me, but only you,

Stay with me and then I will begin to shine as you shine; so to be a light to others;

The light will be all from you; none of it will be mine.

It will be you shining on others through me.

Let me preach you without preaching, not by words but by example,

by the catching force, the shining eyes, and empathetic influence of what I do and am,

and the obvious fullness that my heart holds for you.. Amen (St John Henry Newman)

You need a big heart to say this prayer with gusto. You cannot say it if you suffer from low self-esteem; if you're not sure that God loves you. Nor can you say it if you think that you're full of original sin for which Jesus had to die to forgive you. No, you can only say it if you trust that God is madly in love with you, and is already within you, trying to shine through your eyes and your body. You need a great desire in you, a passion, and a new and extravagant hope.

What is the key? We need to fall in love with the BIGNESS, openness, trust and freedom of the Holy Spirit. If Jesus and St Francis, Thomas Aquinas and St Therese and Pope Francis, and, in fact, all the great saints, are ones to go by, it's about BIGNESS, not smallness. They could say that prayer. Their God was BIG, big in love, big in forgiveness, big in everything. But we have made God so small. We cannot believe God loves us so much. We still believe all we were told when we were children – even though now a lot of it is seen as very mis-leading; some of those teachings have done irreparable damage and have twisted lovely souls out of their true shape – and they are even called 'spiritual abuse'. (Eg God remembers our sins and punishes us. We are born in sin. Limbo. Many are still told that, and so we become more fearful and guilty.) If Jesus died for anything it was to stop us being afraid. The Holy Spirit will never be chained or ever locked in a box – the wildest, freest, uncontrollable Spirit who is at the heart of every kind of true love and good energy our planet has ever known.

Pope Francis gave two long interviews over soon after he became Pope. When the texts were published, the world and Church were buzzing. Why? Because he said that God is losing patience. The Holy Spirit has decided that enough is enough. The shutters are being pulled back. A new light has been let in. Like it was in 1968, after the Second Vatican Council. But this time we are more ready to receive it. And this time we will hold on to it better.

What did the Pope say to send shock-waves of hope around the Church and around the world?

Was it something never said before? A private revelation for our times? Something a scholar found in the caves of archaeology or in the cellars of ancient doctrines?

No! he told the world, simply, that God loved it, that God loves each one of us, no matter what; that God is in love with all creation, with every moment of its evolution; that it is all the work and play of the Holy Spirit. Gods' love is extravagant, unconditional, not dependent on anything that we do to earn it, to merit it, to deserve it. That's what he said. And there's nothing we can do to make God love us more or love us less. Nothing! So don't even try. Because there is no need. God can only love.

The Pope spoke of a grace called 'magnanimity'. A very big word. What does it mean? It is another word for BIGNESS. God cannot stop loving us. And never did banish us from any Garden. God IS the uncontrollable and unconditional love

that floods over us from within, making us shine like the sun, as Blessed John Henry Newman reminded us just now. God cannot remember our foolish sins – but we do, I'm afraid. God's love has from the beginning forgiven us everything – once and for all and forever and for everyone. But of course we do not believe that. And we worry about confession and feel guilty if we do not go. And we hang on to our sins. We cannot imagine a love like that. And so we continue to act like fallen people in a fallen world, a 'damned mass' as St Augustine so delicately put it, exorcising the devil out of our children in baptism the moment they are born, and making 'mea culpa' the mantra of our lives. (Do we act this way with those we love?)

What else did Pope Francis say. What is holiness? he was asked. How would you answer that? What would you say? Being a Catholic? Living in the state of grace? Going to Mass every Sunday? Loving the new translation? No! this is what he said: *Holiness is a woman trying desperately to bring up her kids, a man trying to make enough money to feed the family, the suffering of those who are treated unjustly, who are rejected, in anguish, those alienated from society and rejected by the church.* He said God was in everyone's life, in all our experiences, especially in the family itself, which is the domestic church.

God is already living in the city of each person's heart, he said, and is already in the heart of every city. And was already alive and well in every country and people long before we arrived to convert them. The Pope spoke about trying too hard to convert people. 'Proselytism' he said, 'is a solemn nonsense. What we need to do is to meet and talk with people and create new things.'

Our human relationships are God's love in disguise. When we forgive, God forgives. When we love, it is God's love. When we speak truly the words of compassion, it is the Gospel in the present tense. When we do what our heart tells us to do, to be faithful in love, to try to overlook our hurts, to reach out all the time to others, to respect creation and all creatures, to judge or marginalise nobody, then, whether we go to Church or not, whether we know it or not we are worshipping God.

What else did the Pope say that shocked so many people ? – some loving it and some very disturbed by it. Having spoken about magnanimity as the mirror of God, as Thomas Aquinas had done before him, he said that we need to recover the mystical in our soul and in our church. The mystical is that part of us that loves beauty and that is not at home with boxes and straight lines. The mystical loves the passion for the possible, the outrageous yearning for the light, the belief in the impossible. There is a mystic in all of us. The mystic in you comes alive when you are deeply touched, moved by beauty, lost before the falling leaves of autumn, lost before the falling mercy of God. 'God is like the almond flower in Sicily, Antonio', the Pope said to his interviewer. 'It blooms first'. God always loves us first. We have nothing to do with making love happen – we can only accept it, or refuse it. When we accept it we blossom. It reminds us of the lovely much-quoted question - '*Speak to us of God*', the almond tree was asked. *And the almond tree blossomed. God is the blossoming*, the healing, the humanising, the flowering, of all that is – the heart of the cosmos and the cosmos of the heart.

There is often resistance to this kind of talk. You may notice a resistance in yourself. This is a good thing. Just stay with it and reflect on where the resistance is coming from. It is time we allowed grace to transform us now. We need immense courage. Fear has ruled us for too long. This is a most special moment in the life of our church, a turning point, a cusp of grace, a tipping point to change the future.

(Extract from Daniel's introduction to a retreat for the Irenaus Community)