Fourth Sunday of Lent

Perhaps the question ‘why do catholic priests wear pink vestments this Sunday of Lent?’ is not the most pressing concern for the world just now. But it offers a glimpse behind the anxiety and inner and outer turbulence that our human family is suffering. Today is ‘Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday’ and the traditional liturgical colour for joy is pink.

What is there to be happy about? Not so much, but joy is different. Happiness (treasure it while you have it) depends on external circumstances or forms of relationship. While they last, we easily slip into a gratitude that assumes that the time of happiness will be permanent. And what, after all, is permanent? Joy, however, is not dependent on external circumstances and passing forms. It flows continuously from a source, a pure spring, from being itself. Nothing can block it except our own dark tendency to bottle the spring water, to possess, to pollute the sheer innocent reality of it with the illusions of our own making and greed.

Nothing is so painful at first as the transition from lost happiness to sheer joy.

For some decades now we have been aware that the unprecedented material happiness, identified with affluence, came at an unreasonable and unsustainable price. Our personal humanity, civility and social justice, sanity and our global home itself were being polluted and abused. But what could we do about it? The people who sounded the alarm were dismissed as cranks or exaggerators. The moaners and groaners also became a class, an industry. Politicians were among the people who held power. But we came to see that politics was increasingly a public mask of power. Trust and respect for politics and law, necessary for any form of civilisation, plummeted. We saw elected chaos and government by barabarians.

The joy of life was grdaually siphoned off and bottled in worsening degrees of unfairness and surreal selfishness: the richest one percent today own half of the world’s wealth - even now, as we are socially distancing and quarantined and the most vulnerable are suffering worst. Some of the one percent are generous and good people but even the worst of them were slowly realising it was a little too unreal to last. Anger may build against them – as it did in the passive aggression of populism. But demonising them is unfair and unreal too.

In today’s gospel Jesus cures a man born blind. His disciples asked him who were to blame for his misfortune, and he declined to point the finger of blame. He said the healing itself was the meaning – it revealed the divine fullness of life, the joy of being, pushing through human limitations and handicaps. Jesus cured the man by spitting on the ground and making a paste with the earth, applying it to the man’s eyes and telling him to wash in the spring-fed Pool of Siloam. Later the man said, ‘all I know is, once I was blind and now, I can see.’

Words used in 1772 by John Newton, the reformed slave trader in his hymn *Amazing Grace*. ‘And grace will bring us home’, the hymn also says.’

Monday of Lent Week Four

Meditators come to know that ‘experience is the teacher’. As they stop relying too much on external sources of authority and trust their own heart, they come to know what experience itself means. Not just what happens but what happens because of what happens. I mean, not just what happens during the meditation but what happens in our self and in life as a whole because of what happens in meditation, even if we don’t see it happening all the time.

Meditation is a source of wisdom because it teaches us this truth so simply. It helps us read the signs and patterns of life and to read the book of nature itself. In a relatively short time people around the world have been forced to stay at home, not rush around, fly, drive., shop, buy the latest model and go home and throw away the old, waste resources and time. A bit judgemental but I don’t exclude myself either.

Sometimes what we read in the book of nature is childishly obvious. Since these restrictions have been imposed their impact is apparent in the pollution readings in N. Italy gathered by the European Space Agency’s Sentinel Satellite. Emissions of nitrogen dioxide (vehicle exhaust) have dropped considerably. Pollution in China, especially in Wuhan and Hubei Province has also dramatically plunged.

This is what is happening but what is happening because of what is happening?

After the first meditation this morning I had as usual twenty minutes before the second. Usually I read in this time but as the morning was so fresh and beautiful, I walked around and found myself reading the book of nature. It wasn’t difficult. I didn’t have to measure nitrogen emissions or theologise. The birdsong was enough, the purity of the air and the lucidity of the silence. One sound I had heard but not identified before, became clear as a bird swooped down towards and emitted an odd raspy note. The frogs are beginning their cacophony. And because of the rain the lake is wonderfully full, and the fish look plump. Jean Christophe cut the grass and the smell of it is promising us the warm days to come.

With the Coronavirus is nature punishing us for how we have treated her? That’s one way of putting it. That’s what is happening karmically. But what is happening more is that we can be awakening to the infinite beauty of nature and the animal kingdom. Who doesn’t fall in love with the beautiful? And who can do harm to what they love while they love?

So, I walked in the fresh morning air, scents and sounds, thinking too of the dangers around us and the loneliness and fear that so many are suffering. I thought of my own sins. But more, I felt the amazing grace that restores our sight when we have become blind.

Beauty will save the world.