Friday Lent Week One

Adult survivors of child-abuse often describe a coping mechanism that they developed when the repeated abuse was about to happen again. Hearing the steps coming down the corridor and their door open, they would deal with the terror, disgust and shame it would soon inflict by separating from their body. Imagining that they were floating up in a corner of the ceiling, looking down at what was happening to someone who was not really them, was their only way of escape.

It worked at the time, but the solution evolved into the problem in later life when they realised that now they never felt themselves to be real and were never embodied with the people they were with. Fear, distance and an irrational but unshakeable feeling of self-alienation accompanied them and wrought havoc in every aspect of their life.

How cruelly abuse in childhood influences and distorts one’s future life is now widely recognised, after millennia of thinking that children simply got over it as they grew older. The twisted perception of oneself as the guilty victim in the most ordinary situations of life, snatches away the ordinary joys and wonders of the adventure of life in each of it chapters.

Yet at the heart of that adventure is the healing process. Within it, grace unpredictably arrives, often when the situation is about to become intolerable. Grace may manifest in a conversation overheard, a word dropped into silence, a look, a book, an almond tree in early bloom backlit by sunlight on a chilly spring day. Or in a person. Grace does not use force, but it is powerful. It does not further erode our already limited freedom, but it is, gradually, irresistible. When we reject it because it is exposing a pain we prefer to repress, memories we cannot fully call to consciousness, grace does not take offence and spurn us. It expresses a far deeper love than that.

In the desert of our heart, ‘where the healing fountain starts’, grace springs up, penetrating through the densest layers of pain and the fear of reality. Whatever can lead us to this desert, where true encounters, occur is sacred. For the person who meditates, this most simple entry into the desert is a repeated, but always disturbing discover. It initiates a long process of letting go and a transforming re-evaluation of the whole map of our life we had made.

Of course, the fruits of meditation then guide us to the other sources of grace and healing we need: the safe place where one can share the shame, the sense that people who, despite their own weakness, can channel an intimacy that seemed forever lost to you, that the saviour one fantasises about does not exist. But the saviour who knows you and has known your own pain, is gently touching you into a new life.

Saturday Lent Week One

Contemplatives may not have many gifts to boast of, but they need to be good at dealing with the demon of acedia. Demons are semi-autonomous forces in the psyche that block grace. Acedia is a strong one because it can be pushed away but then return at unexpected moments. Its symptoms are common: discouragement, restlessness, hopelessness, giving up the work of letting go. This is being put to the test, the recurrent temptation for every pilgrim. According to one gospel’s account of Jesus’ forty days in the desert, he was tempted by a powerful trio of illusions that he saw through. But the ‘devil left him to return at a later time’. Maybe it returned in the garden of Gethsemane.

When he was there in the early hours of the morning of his last day, he underwent the fear and trembling of death, the abyss of loneliness, even when his friends were sleeping deeply close beside him. ‘My heart is ready to break with grief’. St Luke, one of the most realistic of the gospel writers says that at this point of exhaustion, on the brink of despair, an ‘angel from heaven appeared bringing him strength’. Angels may not stay but, when you can face your grief, they come when you need them.

Our heart breaks when we feel apart. A loss, a tragic misunderstanding, a demon we cannot send away convinces us that we are helplessly apart and asunder: separated from everyone and everything. Whatever seems to connect us to others or to the world appears to be superficial and transparently a false consolation.

This inner brokenness can overwhelm, or it can lead to compunction of heart. The grace of compunction happens when we keep the broken heart open despite the temptation to deny and resist grace, to protect our wounded self with the separateness of the ego. Compunction punctures the illusion of being apart that it seems safer to cling to. Then, from the heart that stays open despite its pain, compassion streams.

From the fear and nightmare of being apart from everything we emerge seeing that, no kidding, we are a part of everything. For a while, maybe a few decades, we flip between these two versions of reality until the forty days are completed.