Tuesday Lent Week Two

The Judaean desert that Jesus knew and where John the Baptist baptised is not far from the ever-ancient modern city of Jerusalem. It is located on a plateau 800 metres above sea level between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean, two bodies of water as far apart in nature and personality as one could imagine. Israel is a small land of big extremes and polarities, including its geography.

We persuaded our guide and driver to take us to the desert which meant a high quiet spot where we looked over hills that, as it has been a wet winter, had an unusual slight wash of green. You can still feel the aridity and bareness which the sun would soon parch. We sat and looked down at the monastery of St George, clinging to the walls of a steep valley. Like Skellig Michael and other remote monastic sites, one wonders why the search for God in the heart of the self and in creation so often calls some people to such odd and even dangerous extremes.

One thing is certain, that the search for God is not for tourists. It turns us into pilgrims. It is an inner pilgrimage that in the end ‘demands not less than everything’. This isn’t such a bad deal as we get everything – called the kingdom. We may go our own natural pace - even take time off - without getting punished for it. But it still requires us eventually to see all aspects of our life as relentless revelations of the sacred, whether through a joy that dissolves our being into the universe or suffering that drives a bolt of iron through the soul. The life of Jesus retraced in the Holy Land leads the pilgrim from the green hills of Galilee where, among birdsong and the lilies of the field, he delivered his version of universal wisdom, the sermon on the Mount, to sweating blood in Gethsemane, abused and tortured and executed in Golgotha.

Package tourists enjoying idyllic resorts may also go through dark nights of the soul, but this is not how the tour operators advertise them – a ‘wonderful holiday on the beach where you will touch the heights and depths of human experience.’ I am not saying that suffering is desirable but inevitable and always meaningful. Hotel guests at a hotel complain when they don’t get everything they want. But life is not so much about complaint as interpretation.

To see the meaning of the spectrum of experience we need to hold the ends together so the unity can be felt. We then see and feel the harmony between our own nature – the personal and inner sense of self – with external nature, the world as it is.

Except, learning how to wait in pain without fantasy in the desert and how to dance on the boat in the silent Lake of Galilee, is more than harmony. It is being one. ‘When you make the two into one, and the inner as the outer… then you will enter the kingdom’, says the Gospel of Thomas (22).

When what we are going through interiorly is not integrated with the people and nature around us, we have an ecological emergency. When they are one, we are peace and beauty, the sign of God’s presence, bathes everything in itself.

Wednesday Lent Week Two

When was the last time you read a novel? Or watched a Netflix series, which is taking the place of novels in meeting our story-telling needs?

Western literature could be said to originate in the teeming imagination applied to all the things that fill the passage of life – from the daily chores and routines to the tragedies and times of bliss. In yesterday’s reflection I thought about how the mind, especially in times of great distress, jumps from scene to imaginary scene trying out different versions of reality. A great writer selects from this overwhelming choice of parallel universes and focuses on creating a convincing version of one of them. A very great writer also leaves a trace of the teeming mind in the order he creates, a sense of all the possible other ways in which characters and the storyline could have developed. This, oddly, is what makes a good story seem ‘real’ and therefore satisfies us

For many modern writers, story and making order out of chaos, seem secondary to portraying the reality of the restless imagination. They leave us with a. sense of flux and without an ending. This too is vanity, the pursuit of the wind, as Ecclesiastes say. Even stories that don’t satisfy our expectation of a beginning, middle and end, help us make sense of life. Poems and photography are forms of this too and even music tells a story without words or images.

Living in the moment may not be good for novelists. They need to float and wander among different possible presents. Yet they too need the discipline of sitting down regularly and taming the mind. Like us meditators.

Despite rapid economic globalisation and the contagion of Hollywood culture the world remains an enigmatic, infuriating and wondrous mosaic. If our minds and lives are teeming, what about the planet? So, despite the westernisation of the ‘East’, the erosion of its wisdom cultures by materialism, and the cultural collapse of the ‘West’ we can still speak of these two hemispheres and add to them the North and South manifestations of humanity. Western mind and culture is shaped by storytelling, from Homer and the bible on, as a way of knowing the unknowable and expressing the ineffable. Without stories we would be as lonely as Adam without animals.

At many times and on different levels, we share our personal story with others as a sign of trust and growing love. The gospel is a story of a person in whom the inner and outer became or always were extraordinarily one. That oneness, his Spirit, continues to move among us in our own inner and outer universes. It embraces humanity, offering itself without force or blame. If we recognise this, we are walking our life in his footsteps, and he in ours, in a wisdom always entwined with love. His spirit teaches us to accept whatever is, *now*, to separate fantasy from reality. To be faithful and not to run away from ourself.

Thursday Lent Week Two

An atheist intellectual I met once said to me, ‘I wish I was a Catholic who could believe that lighting a candle for someone in trouble did any good.’ It’s an attitude to faith that many non-believers have, wishing they weren’t so intelligent and free of illusion so they could have the false comfort of believing in an illusion.

What difference does lighting a candle make? Or the Eucharist? Or any of the kinds of prayer that might seem to relieve our anxiety or loneliness but don’t make any difference to the cause of the problem. Like buying a lottery ticket, we know we won’t win but buy it anyway.

‘Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.’ In times of distress, especially, these words can be fatally misinterpreted. What they truly mean can only be understood when we have discovered what they don’t mean. Discovering their truth shakes our idea of God to its roots, and dissolves long held and cherished illusions about ourselves as a child of God. Children have strong expectations. For example, you cry out in your valley of darkness for an end to the pain, for relief or a good outcome of all you are going through. During the First World war the solders in the trenches would hear their wounded companions dying alone all night in no man’s land. At first, they would cry out to God to save them. Just before they died, they would simply be calling for their mother.

Appealing to God, from a sincere heart, to change things when they become unbearable may bring relief. But when the prayer comes back unanswered, ‘return to sender’, and things continue to get worse, relief changes to bewilderment and despair. How can God be so cruel, so unresponsive to his children? It is then that our version of God begins to die.

The gods of the ancient world, who depended on human devotion and credulity, began to disappear as people ceased to believe in them and transferred their loyalty to the new gods. False gods are always dying and new ones being born. But it is very hard to discover and accept that the God we are praying too with such heartfelt hope is silent because he doesn’t exist.

Yet that same terrible, negative silence can turn into the true silence of the living God. We have to endure it, sit in it, learn to wait without hope because hope would be hope for the wrong thing. The sterile emptiness of the dead space of our old faith becomes pregnant, how or when we don’t know. As the new-born and true God grows in us we feel a hope and joy in the stirring of life. This is the desert spirituality of Lent – allowing the newly-conceived to be formed in our enduring waiting without anything we may think of as hope. And finding, against the odds, joy even in the midst of suffering.