

REFLECTIONS OF A PARISHIONER

Booklet 3



ST WINEFRIDE'S PARISH, NESTON

EASTER 2016

CONTENTS



1. Where do I end and you begin
3. All is Gift
5. 3 O' Clock in the Morning
7. O My God
9. All Saints
11. Faith
13. Simon of Cyrene

WHERE DO I END AND YOU BEGIN



When I first read this, I read it as a personal question. I thought of my life and my relationship with my wife of fifty odd years. We each are a half of one whole. We do things together. When one of us goes out without the other we feel incomplete, lost and alone even in a gathering of people we know. We think the same thoughts. One will say exactly what the other is thinking. There is a kind of telepathy between us. When one is in pain, the other feels it, when one is sad the other shares the sadness, when one is happy the other is also happy. And yet we are two separate people, different personalities. I think, perhaps it gives me a very small insight into the Holy Trinity, the three persons in one God, a circle of love, unbroken, complete, perpetual, eternal.

I first saw the phrase on a building in Edinburgh. After researching it, I found that it was the title of a festival of contemporary art. Through new and recent works, twenty international artists consider what it means to combine “common” with “wealth”. It takes its name from a work by Indian artist Shilpa Gupta. Unfortunately I was not in the city long enough to visit any of the galleries that were showing the pictures.

On further research, I found a song released by the rock band Radiohead, “Where I end and you begin”. The chords are haunting, sad and mournful. The lyrics, although to be honest I did not understand them, seem to me to be about change: Change that is unwanted and fearful for the future. It seems to be a song full of sorrow and regret.

I began to wonder how the title applies to my own life, my faith, my relationship with God. I know that I must change, that I am changed and have been changing all my life. The change must come to a point where I no longer am and God is, where my soul has surrendered completely to God and where he will draw me into his divinity. I am like a tiny droplet in a great river coursing its way to where it will become part of a vast ocean of love. I cannot yet quite see the Ocean but I am sure it is there and if I keep faith, I will get there when I, such a tiny droplet, will become one with that infinite ocean of love. I am sorry for the sins of my past but I am also fearful that I may not be strong enough to finally sever the ties that bind me to my self-centredness and my arrogance. I must continue to put my trust in God’s mercy and forgiveness and persevere to the end.

*Your glory may we ever seek
In rest, as in activity,
Until its fullness is revealed,
O source of life, O Trinity*

ALL IS GIFT

How rich are the depths of God – how deep his wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods! Who could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be his counsellor?

I am not a learned man. I attended grammar school until the age of sixteen. I left school having gained a few GCE O levels, one of which was in RE. So I am no theologian or philosopher. My faith is an uncomplicated one. I believe in God because to me it is the only logical explanation for why we are here. There has to have been a beginning, an event, whether it is the big bang or something which preceded it, which created something from nothing. Of course the same cannot apply to God. I cannot comprehend a timeless eternity but I feel it is logical to accept that God is an unfathomable being that existed before time began.

Since the beginning of time, humanity has been aware of God and searched for him in the sun and the moon and the stars, even in the Earth and the animals that occupy the Earth. God was in all these things but none was God. We are all part of God's creation, but why, out of all the animals he created, did he single out humankind to be above all the others? Why did he make us rational beings able to question, discover and understand life? He gave us the ability to love and to hate. He wanted us to be like him and to love him. But we could not choose to love him without knowledge of him. In its quest for knowledge, humanity became corrupted, self-centred and turned away from him. We discovered transient, earthly pleasures which we believed could replace the joy of living in God's presence, little realising that these could never be enough, never satisfy. Yet God did not abandon us.

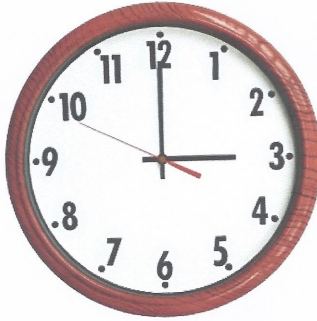
I believe that all is gift. All that I am, all that I have, all that I am able to do has been given to me. God gave me life and the circumstances of my life and the people who have been and are a part of it have made me the person that I am. Each thing, each person is a gift to me from God. Therefore I have a responsibility to love and cherish those gifts and not to abuse them. It follows then that I too am a gift from God to them and as such have a responsibility to be the best example of God's love that I can be.

We have a responsibility to love one another as Jesus told us to. We have a responsibility to look after the poor and the needy, the sick and the dying: to love those who share our faith and those whose faith is different to our own: to rescue the fallen. It seems to me that if every human being followed the two simple commandments that Jesus taught us – love God with all your heart and soul and love you neighbour as yourself – there would be no hunger or disease, no war, no violence. Imagine the whole world living in peace.

All that exists comes from him: all is by him and for him. To him be glory for ever! Amen. Romans 11: 33-36



3 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING



I wish I could get to sleep. I've been lying here for hours, tossing and turning. You'd think I'd be used to it by now. It's the same every night. I just lie here on my own, in the dark, talking to myself and thinking. Why can't I stop thinking? I wish there were a way to turn off my brain for a few hours so that I could sleep. And even when I do manage to fall asleep for a while my brain is still active in those dreams. They're not exactly nightmares but they are unpleasant, certainly not "sweet" dreams. I just have to lie here counting the seconds which pass so slowly. Each second is like a minute and each minute is like an hour, and yet when I look back, the years seem to have flown by.

It seems no time since I was young and healthy and fit. I had a good time then. I lived life to the full. I didn't care about anything or anyone. I just wanted to get the most out of life. I tried everything at one time or another. I was living life in the fast lane. I had lots of friends but they were all hangers-on. They wanted to be around me because I was "the Man". Where are they now? They drifted away quickly enough when somebody else came along, when I was no longer "the Man". Now here I am a Grumpy old man, who can't sleep: on my own with just my thoughts for company, thinking. I wish I could stop thinking.

Maybe I should have taken a wife, but I was not the marrying type. I didn't want to be tied down when there was so much to do, so much to enjoy, so much to experience. Besides, I didn't want to be tied to just one woman. Still, if I had a wife, I might not be so lonely now. I'd have someone to look after me.

My care worker, Pauline, will be here in the morning for a couple of hours. I wouldn't tell her as much, but I do look forward to her coming. She's like a ray of sunshine. She's always so cheerful. She's one of those do-gooders, one of those Christians. I've never been one for religion, its all superstition. When you die you die. That's the end of it: nothing more: no heaven: no hell: no God! But then, maybe I've already died. Maybe this is my hell, this darkness, this loneliness, this emptiness. Oh God, don't leave me like this for ever!

I don't know why Pauline is so happy. She's not rich. She's not poor, but she's not rich. If she were rich, she wouldn't put up with an old reprobate like me. She's always kind and thoughtful: and patient. She says it's because she has all she needs, her husband, her children and most importantly her faith. She doesn't push her religion on you. She just seems to live it. It's as if she knows something I don't. Maybe she does. I told her it's too late for me for all that stuff. Imagine me, turning up at the gates of heaven and there's a long stream of do-gooders waiting to get in and an old sinner like me comes along and jumps the queue. It wouldn't be fair, but Pauline says it is never too late to be saved. All I have to do is turn to God and He will welcome me with open arms. He'll even throw a party for me. I don't think I deserve it after all that I've done and after the way I've lived. Listen to me, maybe I've got a conscience after all. Perhaps I'll ask Pauline.....tomorrow.....that is.....if tomorrow ever c.....

*O Holy Spirit,
Bend the stubborn heart and will;
Melt the frozen, warm the chill;
Guide the steps that go astray.*

O MY GOD

*O God, you are my God, for you I long,
For you my soul is thirsting,
My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water.*

Psalm 62

I think it is foolish to say there is no God; there is no life after death. From a purely practical point of view it is foolish. If I live my life believing in God, trying to do his will and trying to serve my fellow man; trying to recognise my sinfulness and hoping for an eternal reward in God's presence, when I come to the moment of my death, if there is no God I will not be disappointed because I will not know. My life will be ended; I will have ceased to be. I will have lived a happy life and lost nothing. On the other hand, if there is a God, as I believe there is, I will see God's face and experience a joy beyond compare. I will then be in an everlasting ecstasy. My faith will have been rewarded. I will have gained an eternal paradise.

However, if I live my life denying the existence of God, when I breathe my last, if there is no God I will not be able to say "I told you so" for I will not know. I will have ceased to be. But if God really exists, I will see His face and realise with unbearable horror, what I have risked losing.

No-one can prove that God exists. No-one can prove that God does not exist. I do not think that people should believe just in case, but for those who have no faith, it is surely wise to keep an open mind. Only then will God be able to speak to him. There have been times in my life when I have doubted the existence of God but those doubts have served to make my faith stronger. Most people have doubts, look at St Peter, how often did he lose faith, but always Jesus was there to reassure him and his faith became stronger. On the night before Jesus was crucified, Peter was too afraid to admit to knowing Jesus and denied him three times. Only a few weeks later, he stood up before the crowd and urged them to "save yourselves from this perverse generation".

Non-belief in God can often be an excuse to give in to temptation or to not live a life of service to others; to not make the effort to do the right thing. We may often be angry with God and blame him for all the bad things He allows to happen, but then that itself is an act of faith. I believe that within each one of us is a small spark of faith. If we allow that spark to become a flame, who knows how brightly it will burn.

Be silent. Be still

Alone: empty before your God.

Say nothing. Ask nothing.

Be silent. Be still.

Let your God look upon you.



ALL SAINTS

We were told on “All Saints” day that a saint was someone who had fallen in love with God. I thought that was a lovely description and I began to think about my own faith. I asked myself why I go to Mass. If I am to be honest I have to admit that, as I was born into a devout catholic family, I was taken to Mass as a child. When I started to attend the catholic school I was taught that I had an obligation to attend mass on Sundays and Holy days and that it was a sin not to attend. In my early years I enjoyed going. It was like a pageant being performed on the altar, especially at the 11 o’clock Mass which was a High Mass. The celebrants were clothed in wonderful costumes which were trimmed in gold thread. The priest spoke in a mysterious language I didn’t understand. Even the music was different to anything I had heard on the radio. At various stages during the service, the head altar boy would carry onto the altar the incense burner and the church would be filled with its wonderful sweet fragrance. The sacred vessels, like the tabernacle were made of gold and held the body and blood of Jesus. I was in awe and wanted to be a priest when I grew up.

In my teenage years I continued to go to mass but now it had become a chore, a duty. I remember wishing that I was not a catholic and then I would be like the protestant kids in the street who didn’t go to church and didn’t feel guilty about not going. I also felt that not going would be a betrayal of my parents; in particular my dad who had recently died and who I was sure was in heaven looking down on me and watching over me

In my twenties and early thirties, I came to the conclusion that if I was a member of and believed in the Holy Catholic Church I must be obedient to its rules and regulations even if I did not understand them and did not fully agree with them. I continued to attend Mass and took my family with me.

Then “Vatican II” happened. It brought about a whole new way of thinking. Suddenly the priest was facing the congregation and saying the prayers in our own native language. We were now participants in the service rather than spectators. We were encouraged to think for ourselves.

We were told about a God of love and forgiveness and mercy. We were no longer told how not to be sinful but advised how to be virtuous. The Beatitudes were emphasised instead of the Ten Commandments. The Mass took on a whole new meaning. It was no longer a chore or an obligation but a joyful celebration of God’s unfathomable love. I began to look forward to Sundays.

Now that I am retired, I am able to attend morning prayers and mass most days, not because I am such a good person but because I am weak and sinful. That couple of hours of calm and tranquillity in God’s presence sets me up for the day. It makes me stronger and more able to cope with whatever may happen to me throughout the day. It has taken me a lifetime to come to this understanding of the Mass and to learn this lesson about my faith for I am a slow learner but God has been patient with me.

*This is what the Lord asks of you:
Only this, to act justly,
To love tenderly
And to walk humbly with your God.*

Micah



FAITH

“Who does he think he is? We knew him when he was a scruffy kid. Who is he to tell us what’s right or wrong? It’s not as if he had any money, he’s just a carpenter like his dad. They had to work for a living just like us and here he is now reading the Holy Scriptures and telling us to repent as if he was some-one”

This is probably a familiar conversation to most of us when someone tries to show authority. So it was when Jesus returned to his hometown. They couldn’t believe the authority with which he spoke. Jesus was unable to perform miracles because of their lack of faith. Yet they had known him for most of his life. They had known his parents, Mary and Joseph. How could they not have realised how special a family they were, how gentle and caring, how loving and considerate they were? How could they not have seen their goodness?

The Pharisees had difficulty accepting Jesus. They wanted a sign from God. They had witnessed the miracles performed by Jesus. They had heard the words he had spoken with such authority. They had met the man, touched him and looked into his eyes. How could they not have recognised that here was a man sent by God? The Centurion had known it when he uttered the words “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof”. The leper had known it when he pleaded “You can cure me if you want to”. The woman who had been haemorrhaging for years had known that by just touching his robe she would be cured. How could those learned men who had studied the scriptures not have known who Jesus was?

When they first laid hands on Jesus to arrest him, how could they not have sensed that here was someone special? When he submitted himself so humbly, did they not suspect that this man was different? When he stood meekly before the court and they brought false witness against him, they must have known that he was innocent. When they ripped his back with cruel lashes, when they crowned him with piercing thorns, when they slapped his cheek and jeered at him, when they spat in his face were they not ashamed? When they drove the nails through his hands and feet, when they hung him high on the cross, did they not have any compassion? When with his last breath he called out to God “Father forgive them”, did they not recognise their mistake? When day turned to night, when lightening struck the temple, did they then not realise that this was the son of God?

*O Lord, give me eyes that can truly see you.
Give me ears that can truly hear you.
Give me a heart that can truly love you.
Give me faith that I may dedicate my life to you.*



SIMON OF CYRENE

Quite a crowd has gathered here on the hill to watch the spectacle. Many are just standing and staring, frozen as if some catastrophic event has obliterated all their hopes and dreams. They seem to be alive but no longer able to live. It's as if they have no longer any reason to live. Others are wandering round and jeering, calling him names.

“Blasphemer!”

“You said you were going to save the world, well save yourself!”

“If you are the son of God, come down and prove it!”

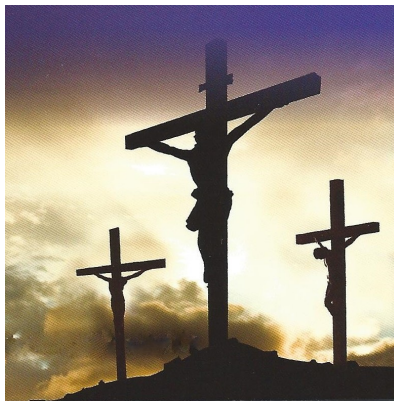
How cruel they are. Of course, nobody is bothered about the other two, the real criminals, all their attention is on Jesus.

I didn't know the man. I didn't want to get involved. I was trying to make my way into the city. I've been travelling for weeks and I was tired and hungry and wanted to find somewhere to eat and get some rest. I'd heard the name mentioned, more and more often the nearer I came to Jerusalem. People spoke about how he preached about repentance and about the Kingdom of God: how he fed thousands with just a few loaves and a couple of fish: how he cured the sick and how he had even brought his friend back to life after he had been dead and in his tomb for days. I didn't believe them; I thought they were just stories, fantasies. As I struggled to get through the crowd, a couple of soldiers grabbed me and forced me to the front to help Jesus carry his cross. He had fallen and as I leaned forward to help him to his feet, our eyes met. He seemed to look deep into my very soul. We had never met but it was as if he knew everything about me. My body tingled. Nobody has ever looked at me like that before. There was no malice in his eyes, no anger against his abusers, only acceptance: And there was sorrow, sorrow and sympathy for all those who were maltreating him but who knew not what they were doing. But most of all there was love.

I put my arm around him to help him to his feet and it was as if a bolt of lightning had struck me. It was not an unpleasant experience. It was painful but a kind of sweet pain and joyful. It was as if, in that moment, every sin I had ever committed and every sin that I ever will commit had been forgiven.

I helped him to the top of the hill, trying to bear as much of the weight of the cross as I could, but still he fell twice more. At the top the soldiers dismissed me and pushed me aside. I should have gone on into the city but I couldn't leave. I stood and watched while they roughly tore his garments from his poor bruised and bloodied body. They then forced him down and nailed his hands and feet to the wooden cross that he had dragged up the hill which they then raised up and secured in the ground. What agony it must be for him hanging there.

Three hours have passed since they put him up there. A few, mainly women, have stood at the foot of the cross, weeping and praying. As I stand here at the back of the crowd, watching a man that must have only moments left to live, I feel confused and lost. I don't know what to do or where to go or what to think. All I am sure of is that I will never forget that first look or this whole experience. From this day on, my life will never be the same again.



*Composed and printed by Tony Topping
St Winefride's Catholic Church, 5 Burton Road, Neston*

*All reflections available at:
www.stwinefridesneston.org.uk/resources.html*