

March 2017

A Lenten Journey: thoughts from Father Charles

Journeying towards union with God

Scott Fitzgerald referenced a spiritual classic in his quip 'in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning'. And he's partly right, it does tend to be three or four in the morning when most people have those wakeful moments, and anxieties and doubts crowd in, tear into our minds and keep us from sleep.

The spiritual classic to which he referred is '*The Dark Night of the Soul*', a poem by the 16th century Spanish mystic 'John of the Cross'. Over eight poetic verses, he tells of the journey of the soul, from its bodily home to its union with God.

The 'night' for John of the Cross was far longer than the hour or so of early morning anxieties that many of us have to endure; it was considerably longer than a single 'night' too. For John the journey was long number of years, and included suffering that was physical as well as of his soul. Similarly, some two hundred years later, the journey for 'Paul of the Cross' (in the 18th Century) the 'night' lasted some 45 years before he achieved his peace of mind.

The Dark Night

Generally, this term is used to express a sense of the spiritual crisis which is part of the journey toward union with God. Very often it centres on doubts of faith, where an individual feels a real sense of separation from God or a lack of spiritual connection. As we turn the pages of scripture we often see this separation from God as '*desolation*', expressed so well in the Book of Job or in the Psalms. And, of course, we hear it on the lips of Jesus, as we will remind ourselves on Good Friday:

*'About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice,
"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"
which means
"My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?"*

Paradoxically, our spiritual directors will encourage us when we find ourselves in a similar state or crisis. They will try to ensure us that the experience of a spiritual crisis will lead through to the 'other side'; this being to a greater love for God and a sense of closeness and unity.

Reflection before Lent

The reason I bring this to the forefront of our minds now, is that the meditation at Evening Prayer, last Thursday, included a reading from St John of the Cross. In addition to writing this poem John also wrote a lengthy commentary on the poem, and our reading was from the commentary and, it seemed to me, was a useful reflection prior to the start of Lent.

The item that sparked my interest was John talking about 'spiritual sloth'. Whilst the descriptive term is not modern, the experience spans time. His point was that when we engage in worship, spiritual exercises, meditation and prayer we very often find a delight or reward in the activity. There's what he calls an 'instant satisfaction' which we can grow to expect and to crave.

If we look around the many and diverse communities that constitute 'the Church', there are many where this reward, or spiritual consolation, is a key aspect of worship and praise. The reason that many people gather in community, to worship and praise, is the joy and love that they receive; the 'instant satisfaction'.

What happens, says John, when this reward is not given, where there is no joy, there is no satisfaction; and worship feels dry and empty? This is where people can become 'bored' he says, and where the term 'spiritual sloth' can be applied. 'Sloth', because rather than put the hard work in, and apply discipline and determination; and rather than maintaining the practice of the exercises and the rhythms of prayer and meditation; people simply 'stop'.

We know the truth of this. In pretty well all human endeavours, the way of growth is through the barriers of boredom, emptiness; lack of instant result; repetition; pain; and this is a list that could continue to grow - lengthily.

Our Lenten Journey

When we begin our journey of faith we can be tempted, says John, to want God to desire what we want, and we can become dejected if we have to listen to what God wants. When we do this it means we measure God by ourselves, rather than ourselves by God. Surely, John points out, this is contrary to the Gospel, where we are implored to loose ourselves to find God.

We are on a continuing journey of faith, individually and in community. We have many opportunities to work at our growth in faith, and somehow the season of Lent provides a distinct period that we can set-aside for this purpose. We can accept the challenge of doing the exercise (and keeping at it) that we set ourselves for the duration of Lent.

It's a question of selecting the 'exercise' and then sticking with it. Such exercises are many and varied: the thoughtful reading of a particular book; deciding to follow pattern of worship or meditation; learning a new form of Christian meditation; joining a prayer group or coming to the Lent course; or adopting the practice of saying a daily office.

We need to decide, act and stick through the 'dark' times.

May we take this opportunity of Lent to Grow in Faith



Fr ROBIN THOMAS 27.7.1927 – 27.1.2017

Homily given at his Requiem Mass at All Saints on 23rd February

by Jessica Smith

"We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Romans 12:6)

One of the great rewards of ministry, for giver and recipient alike, possibly most especially the priesthood, is that whatever gifts God has bestowed on an individual, these will always converge on the person's offering of themselves often in miraculous and mysterious ways. In the case of Father Robin Thomas, these gifts were most obvious in the outstanding creative and artistic talent he brought to bear in his 26 years of priesthood. He was 62 by the time he was ordained, having already had a long and distinguished career in teaching and lecturing, in design and several artistic fields, including as Head of Fashion at Bower Ashton. He was a master of several art media and the cope of many colours (made for Canon Nevil Boundy) on display this evening, together with the purple chasuble worn by Fr Charles, are fine examples of his design flair as well as his expertise in fabrics and competence in stitching. His considerable flair had found expression in many fields, but he was no dilettante, and his specialist knowledge was sought by the Bristol Old Vic, including the School, the Welsh National Opera, the BBC and as far afield as Ontario. He had a particular knack of creating something splendid from what the less artistic would have thrown out, such as the lampshade made from a disused belisha beacon.

It seems his being called to ordination caused surprise, not to say something of a stir, in the circles in which he moved thirty and more years ago. Some of us here knew his name by then because in the nineteen seventies he had designed and made a fine patchwork banner for All Saints on a commission from the Vicar at the time, Fr John Norton. We were, of course, delighted when he came later to be among us here as honorary assistant curate,

having completed his training at St Stephen's House, Oxford. During his five years with us we benefited immeasurably, not only from his artistic gifts, but from others which soon became evident. He was a diligent and devoted pastor – one reason for choosing this evening's gospel – who also encouraged others in pastoral care. Under his leadership there was a willing and hard-working pastoral team. Before he left us for Cornwall in 1994, I was invited to 'shadow' him on pastoral visits in order to be able to take on some of them after he'd left. It was the beginnings of the Lay ministry I enjoy today.

When he left All Saints, after what seemed far too short a time, he was hugely missed. For as well as being exceedingly hard-working, he was the greatest fun and delightful company. He had a sharp wit and appreciation of life's absurdities, which enabled him to see things in proportion and somehow reassure that things weren't as bad as they seemed. One could go to him admitting a terrible faux pas and he would simply reply 'Oh that's all right.' People have spoken of special times with him. The little boy from the Randall Room Toddlers' group who specially wanted Father Robin to come to his third birthday party and was overjoyed when Robin attended bearing a huge bunch of keys, knowing it would be just the right gift for a young key enthusiast. The elderly lady who was revived from the brink after he anointed her and asked for sherry immediately afterwards (though maybe he would have said that should've been gin!). One of tonight's serving team, our churchwarden's daughter, Sophie, was baptised by him. Ben and Charley, also here this evening, were married by him.

As one so knowledgeable and erudite in the arts, he also had a penchant for kitsch and you'd find different examples he'd accumulated at home, mostly in his kitchen – kitchen kitsch, as we called it. At one time he displayed a hologram which, according to its tilt, would show saccharine images of either Our Lord or Our Lady set against a garish azure sky. People knew of this and would look for the worst examples of it for him. In the gift shops at Lourdes we managed to find a quite dreadful fan and a plastic water bottle moulded as a figure of Our Lady.

One might say that many of Robin's gifts as a priest were implicit rather than explicit. But talking to people – and there's been much pleasure recalling him – we've each recognised his undeniable integrity and holiness, most often revealed in two gifts: friendship and hospitality. As a friend he was faithful and generous, reaching out as well to many he didn't know personally. There are numbers outside the Church community whose lives he touched and who've never forgotten him.

He went from here to Tintagel in North Cornwall, where he was priest-in-charge at St Materiana's for three years. It wasn't perhaps the happiest time of his life, but there was that beautiful cliff-top church and spacious Georgian parsonage where he was housed. Here he could give full rein, not only to his artistry, but to his horticultural flair in the sizeable garden. It had a stream running through it to attract ducks, and a dovecote which, having been dormant for some years, was lovingly restored by him to its proper use with a fresh bevy of doves. In company of his beloved and intelligent border terrier, Bess, together with the

impassive tabby and white cat Blanche, he was a veritable Adam in Eden. In the tiny Fontvrault chapel at the end of the garden he said mass midweek.

From there he moved to St Ives for five years and then to Truro in 2002. Each of his houses was a delight to visit, because he invested each with such attention to detail of colour and composition, but they weren't show places. Another of his gifts was homemaking and every corner had something beautiful to behold. His final home was a modest ex-council house where he immediately saw potential. To one side the neighbours were a couple who kept squawking birds in a large aviary. On the other was a family of indeterminate size - depending on who was serving time - whose long garden at the back consisted almost entirely of brambles, except for a path beaten down the middle to provide access to a lengthy washing line. In no time at all Robin created another Paradise garden between these two. He made his little house look enchanting and cottage-like by replacing much of his family furniture with daintier Queen Anne style. The neighbours, if baffled, admired it all, and there were cordial relations, largely because he was unfailingly kind and outgoing towards them. He would sit out on his terrace on summer evenings with friends, clad in the briefest shorts, gin and tonic in one hand, cigarette in the other, and behold his estate with satisfaction. Like God on day 6 of creation he saw 'it was very good.'

In spite of this homemaking talent, Robin continually missed Bristol after he left, I suppose because it had been home in another way and for a long time. He was a cultured, civilised man, and this city, with all its shortcomings, is a place where he and others like him walk tall, never short of things to see and do. He missed All Saints especially and all the quirky souls who worshipped here. He continued to receive our Parish Magazine until a week before he died and would either write in his distinctive wobbly script or telephone each month to exchange news. A dear man, a beloved friend.

As Christians we believe in God the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a godhead in whom there is perfect relationship, where we are drawn into an ever-expanding circle of love. Robin must have experienced this deeply, since artists are possessed of the capacity to see both people and objects in sublime relationship. Now, with his earthly task done, may the homemaker know his eternal home which is beyond his, or our, imagining. + May he rest in peace.

IN THIS MONTH.....MARCH 1894

REVERENCE

It might have been thought that to write upon such a topic as the above to the people of All Saints' was unnecessary, for Reverence is one of the Christian attributes which we strive especially to attain, and we had hoped, as a congregation, with some success. Our confidence has received a rude shock. From three absolutely distinct quarters, all of them entitled to the highest respect, and each correspondent writing in ignorance that another had written, we have this month received communications which it is impossible to pass over in silence. The allegation is that the "scrambling and pushing" which takes place among communicants at the early Celebrations on Sundays, and even on Week-days, is in direct violation of St Paul's command that all things should be done "decently and in order". One letter, in particular, from a member of the C.B.S., who has special opportunities for observation, is extremely severe; and the Editors have perused it with painful feelings. We have, however, our duty to perform, and we must do it. The confusion which arises is caused by constant collisions, and in our church there is no excuse for it. In many churches there is no entrance to the Chancel save through the gates: the communicants then stand in single file on either side, and those who have received pass in an orderly manner down the centre. With us this arrangement is unnecessary, because we have two additional outlets, one through the Lady Chapel, the other through the Organ Chamber. As, however, the other is on the north side, and leads directly to the Women's seats, it is that exit that should be chiefly used, for, of course, as the women communicants are, to their honour, far in excess of the men, it is to them we are here alluding. But what happens to those who strive to obey this obvious and elementary principle of order? They are met by a stream of communicants advancing through the Organ Chamber to the Altar, and the inevitable consequence is collision and confusion. We trust we have only to mention this painful matter, and the better judgement of the congregation will shew them the right way.

We think also, and it is also our correspondents' view, that the exterior of the church after the services on Sunday does not present that spectacle of calm which should befit the conclusion of a solemn Service in the House of God, but too often that of boys released from school, or the breaking up of an audience from some place of amusement. Instead of passing away quietly to their homes, people linger on the asphalt path in groups, noisily greeting their friends, and often blockading the foot-way and driving others into the muddy road. This is hardly an ideal state of things. We must remember that we have set up for ourselves a high standard at All Saints': and if we fall from it, our fall is so much the greater.

LENT CHARITIES 2017

We are supporting two charities this year. One which supports the Syrian crisis and one local to Bristol.

USPG Rapid Response Fund – Support for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

As the Syrian political crisis continues, large numbers of Syrian children are missing out on education including thousands of refugee children living in countries neighbouring Syria.

USPG has teamed up with other agencies to provide basic education, alongside other practical support such as food distribution.

Further details can be found at uspg.org.uk/worldwide/Syria

Shelter Bristol

A national charity which gives free legal advice relating to a wide range of housing issues.

Support and advice is given to people facing eviction from their homes, and assistance provided to the homeless or those threatened with homelessness. The team also liaise with environmental health authorities regarding conditions of rental accommodation which poses a threat to health and safety.

Further details can be found at england.shelter.org.uk/Bristol

Gift Aid envelopes will be available throughout Lent.

Please remember in your prayers during Lent those who work for the charities and the many desperate and homeless victims they support.

LET'S TALK ABOUT ... DEMENTIA

The second in a series of topical discussions at All Saints, Clifton



Caring for people with Dementia with dignity and compassion is a key issue facing society today.

'Let's Talk about ... Dementia' is a free, open information and discussion event presented by All Saints, Clifton in conjunction with The Alzheimer's Society and The Carers Support Centre. This will be especially useful if you are a carer or have a parent, relative or friend who has any of the wide range of dementia conditions.

MONDAY 27th FEBRUARY 2017

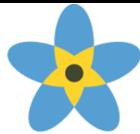
7.00 PM – 8.30PM

The Randall Room

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, PEMBROKE ROAD,

CLIFTON, BS8 3ED

0117 9741355



**Dementia
Friends**

Information Sessions at All Saints

Cath Leighton, who is now a Dementia Champion, will be holding three information sessions at All Saints.

The sessions will increase our understanding of Dementia and identify support that can improve the lives of people living with Dementia.

The sessions will be held on:

Monday 6th March 7-8 pm

Wednesday 15th March 1.30 – 2.30pm

Friday 24th March 1.30 – 2.30pm.

If you would like to attend a session please add your name to the list in the atrium or register at

www.dementiafriends.org.uk

From the Bishop

Fight of the century

As somebody once quipped: “The future ain’t what it used to be!”

2017 has certainly started with some glaring uncertainties. What will Brexit mean for us? What will be the outcomes of the Trump Presidency for the wider world?

Christians reflect the division that seems to have opened up in our nation. Some think both are catastrophic whilst others think this is the Will of God being enacted on a world out of control. What seems clear is both the referendum and the Presidential election are a rejection of the kind of society that left-of-centre, liberal and progressive politicians have visited upon us in recent years.

Fact: we live in a global world, largely created by that nebulous but powerful shadow institution we call ‘the market.’ The market is not all bad, but neither is it the morally neutral, rational entity that some project it as. What’s good is that wealth creation has a positive impact on global prosperity. What’s less good is the unequal way that such prosperity is being shared. It may be true that market correction will ultimately adjust this inequality; the problem is that market correction takes time.

Christianity has always had a global perspective. We believe that all people are created by God and flowing from that is our belief people are inter-dependent. So how should Christians respond?

- We should step up our calling to love our neighbour. My neighbour is a person in need whether in Bristol or in Bangalore.
- We need to listen for the prophetic voices of our culture. Patriotism is good – up to a point, but when it morphs into a narrow self-serving nationalism it becomes ugly.
- Christians in a divided world should work tirelessly for reconciliation. A divided Church has little to offer a divided world.

Some Christians’ tweets make me shudder. Instead we need to make a measured and thoughtful response to the conversation.

+Mike