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The call to be a contemplative Church 16 June 2019 Trinity Sunday

In the name of the holy & undivided Trinity: Creator, Redeemer & Giver of Life. Amen.

Well, it’s a delight to be here with you in this lovely lofty building with 7+ centuries of prayer to support it & to be part of such a striking & lively liturgy on this rich feast of the Trinity. Thank you, Toby, for generously inviting me. And thank you for the subject: called to be a contemplative Church. I’ve found it challenging & stretching.

Well, let’s see what emerges.

I’ve been reflecting somewhat on ‘church’ & what that might mean to you. I expect if I asked you now - if there were appropriate amplification - there would be a range of interesting & diverse responses – perhaps about whom you hope to meet here, what you hope to receive in the service of eucharist, that it’s a place where you hope aspects of your inner self will be restored or healed or nourished. What I also think is important is that when we enter into our Christian gathering of prayer & worship we remain connected with the God of the rest of the week, with whatever external demands may pressurise or threaten us or whatever doubts we may struggle with. As we settle into this place of friendliness & holiness I like to think we might bring before God a sense of our own identity, who am I today with my weaknesses & my gifts & then ask God to bless us all. For me Church is about knowing in my heart that I’m part of God’s creation. So I find the O.T.reading this morning life-giving: the account, the story of Wisdom being created & watching God the Creator forming the heavens, bringing forth the earth & rejoicing in God’s inhabited world. I like to trust that we are part of that on-going story, that we continue to be created & re-created in spite of our sufferings or perhaps because of our suffering, if we can enable our pains & sorrows to help us learn about ourselves, to discover what to let go of & what we can offer to God, which I suggest is all part of praying.

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The American poet, Mary Oliver, who died recently, says this in her poem called ‘Praying’:

It doesn’t have to be

the blue iris, it could be

weeds in a vacant lot, or a few

small stones; just

pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try

to make them elaborate, this isn’t

a contest but the doorway

into thanks & a silence in which another voice may speak.

How do we move through Mary’s doorway of words of prayer into contemplation?

We may perhaps feel that we don’t know what contemplation is, that we haven’t received such a gift or that it’s just not my style or it surely only works for extreme introverts. In daily life, where I believe God is interweaving his Holy Spirit with our own personal spirit, I feel it’s about being able to focus, to concentrate uninterruptedly on something that absorbs us & generates inner peace. It might be solving a complex maths problem or explaining a question about geography or physics or I.T. in your daughter’s or grandson’s exam revision that they can’t fathom, but which you can resolve with calm & clarity. Or it might be absorption in your own studying or reflections where you find creative ideas developing & bubbling up. For me it happens when I’m gardening, with my hands in the soil, helping plants or a shrub to grow & I realise afterwards that negative feelings - grumpiness or indignation or anger - have simply fallen away while I’ve been engaged in the task. It also happens when I’m

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listening to music, especially being at an occasional concert, when mind, heart & spirit are gathered together in me through the performers’ energies of skill & discipline, rhythm & sound - & self-preoccupation has dropped away. I suggest we all have the capacity to be inwardly still & attentive whether we’re involved & absorbed in some practical activity in our job out of the house or at home doing something we enjoy & can relax into, perhaps interior decorating or cooking, that can give us a sense of inner spaciousness.

This potential in our human identity for contemplating consciously the presence of God, I like to feel emerges through our church life of worship, with its shared singing & prayers & listening, where we can be drawn into opening ourselves to God. It’s not only, is it, about what we enjoy or what invigorates us in our gathered church community, but about becoming sensitive to Jesus’ invitation, whether heard or unspoken, to draw close to him through the doorway of holy communion. Such sensitivity is not easy in our competitive, pressurised culture where levels of productivity & popular success can become criteria for what matters most. When I’m being foolish & feel a failure & think I have to prove or defend myself in my Community & find myself rushing around with anxieties, I begin to realise that I have failed really to notice members of staff that I want to greet or smile at, or I don’t see or observe the flowers & blossoming shrubs in our garden. Then I start singing to myself an old Simon & Garfunkel song: ‘Slow down you move too fast, you’ve got to let the moment last…’ ‘Letting the moment last’ can help us, I feel, to enter into Mary Oliver’s doorway of thanks, thanks for the moments & precious memories of what has touched us deeply, or inspired us & given us awareness of the beauty in God’s creation or of Jesus being close.

It is through his humanity that I feel Jesus can attract us – humanity derived largely from the womb & upbringing of his mother Mary & expressed in a variety of ways: in his teaching about ways of becoming blessed, his addressing our hidden or unacknowledged capacities through his relationship with the man called Legion, his moment of fierce & impassioned rebuke of Peter

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when he rejects talk of Jesus’ suffering & death, & then his 3-fold enquiry of Peter’s love for him, preparing him for the care & responsibility needed at the

beginning of the Church’s life, & also the vigorous, subtle encounters with some of the religious leaders of his day, challenging their integrity.

Well, I expect you will have your own examples.

There is also, of course, Jesus’ divinity, powerfully revealed at the Transfiguration & in his control over nature & the elements, & also glimpsed in the exchange with the One he calls Father, the Source of all being; as we hear him saying to his disciples: I & the Father are one; believe in me that I am in the Father & the Father in me. It is important, I think, to remember that early in Genesis there are the strong words that ‘human beings are made in the image & likeness of God’. So Jesus in the Gospels is expressing to us, through both his humanity & divinity, that same God-like-ness that has been formed at the heart of every human person. How may you & I awaken that amazing gift in us with joy & simplicity. According to St John, it is the Spirit that will take what belongs to Jesus & declare it to his followers. So, we have to be awake, to be aware of the nudges of the Spirit, praying that all that hinders our hearts from opening will fall away. Then may we become a channel for the Spirit’s energies to reach those in need, those longing for God’s assurance.

But I also like to listen to Julian of Norwich, the great mediaeval holy woman who wrote her Revelations of Divine love with profound additional reflections added after many years of pondering. She encourages me as she conveys the message given to her by the Holy Spirit.

‘Pray inwardly…for it does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing, yes, even though you think you cannot pray. For when you are dry & empty, sick & weak, your prayers please me, though there be little enough to please you. All believing prayer is precious in my sight.’

It is I believe at Communion in our individual receiving of the transformed bread & wine that the whole body of the church is unified in God. We may find we see

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or hear the person of Jesus in our heart, guiding us in our personal relationships or in the needs of our Church, or helping us to discern wisely & humbly about issues of mission: justice, the environment, our planet’s climate & about the

maintenance & development of the life & beauty of your church.

Yet it may be that you have no direct experience of Jesus communicating with you in this way. But let us trust that your heart will have been opened without your realising it, & that you are receiving, with the bread & wine, God’s love flowing through you, to help build God’s kingdom on earth.

I’m often vividly reminded of the words Jesus speaks in one of the last discourses of St John’s Gospel: ‘Abide in me as I abide in you.’ That he already dwells & remains in us without our needing to ask is an astonishing gift; we can respond by looking into our heart, by seeing in our imagination how we can become part of Jesus’ being. The un-named beloved disciple shows us something of the intimacy we’re all called - invited, encouraged - to become part of: to be close to the heart of Jesus, leaning near to him at the Last Supper. It’s when Jesus’ Spirit is deeply troubled by betrayal & by the approaching degradation & violence of his inevitable death. Yet Jesus also sees that very abandonment on the cross of his whole self to his Father as glory, which is joy & the fullness of love. He is pouring that into us that we may be able to stay close to the troubles & joys of whoever: our family, friends & neighbours, those here in church, & those who may impinge on us through the news across the world.

I have a copy of a small icon - written in the 1970s by a Benedictine monk based at the Mount of Olives - of the beloved disciple leaning close to the heart of Jesus with Jesus’ words: ‘I betroth you to myself in tenderness.’ You might like to look at it at the end of the service.

To the holy & undivided Trinity be all glory & power, wisdom & thanksgiving now & always. Amen.

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