

## Second Sunday of Lent



In today's gospel, on the Transfiguration, Jesus takes his closest three disciples with him up the mountain 'so they could be alone'. It wasn't for a financial planning or strategy meeting but in order to pray, to be truly together. Having myself been on the same mountain recently, I can confirm there is no phone signal there. You have to be. For them, it was the moment when they saw him as a being of light.

In another time and place, when he was 'praying alone in the company of his disciples', he asked them the life-changing question 'who do you say I am?'. They were sufficiently awake then in community to listen to the question in solitude. On other occasions in the gospels solitude and community, such apparent opposites, are integrated. This is also experienced through regular meditation and by living the community it creates. The dance of solitude and community, as two sides of the spinning coin of life, is essential for health of mind and soul. When the dance works and we are healthily balanced, we neither fear solitude nor feel trapped by community.

Life today is excessively outer-directed and over-busy. As our information overload and the demand for instant response increases, so does the feeling that we are overwhelmed by everything that insists to be done or answered *now*. Community, life-balance, the delicate support groups of friends and family, will feel the strain if stress increases. Many business people unconsciously begin to sacrifice their family to their career before realising what is happening to the most precious part of their lives.

Under the pressure of all this, the contemplative element of life - the capacity to be rather than do and to enjoy rather than acquire – is the first fatality. You won't be

surprised that I recommend meditation on a daily basis to resurrect it and save the day. But there's another little 'practice of the presence of God' (aka mindfulness or recollection) that can both help to prepare us to meditate and is a fruit of meditation. It is also a good thing to do if you are just too busy to meditate.

St Benedict, in his lifestyle manual, *The Rule for Monasteries*, opens with a piece of good advice: *every time you begin a good work, you must pray to God most sincerely to bring it to perfection*. For people for whom the idea of God is a serious one, it's possible to read this as a call to full presence of mind and heart in the work we do in a spirit of other-centredness. Even for the person who thinks this is an example of the mythical imagination, the message is useful – reflect on the meaning of your work before you drown in it.

All we have to do, at each new task during the day, is pause. Then call to mind the why question. 'Why am I doing this? Where is my motivation coming from? Can I feel the meaning of my work as a connection between what I do and the people who will be influenced by it? In this way, we find ourselves working for others and doing, if not perfect then certainly *good work*.

## Monday Lent Week Two

It is hard to meditate when we have a toothache, or are burdened by sadness or anxiety, hunger or even a runny nose. In the days of collective faith people better understood the advice to keep healthy so that they could pray. Today, when we find it hard to get beyond 'my experience' as the test and meaning of everything, we come to meditation as a tool for 'wellness'.

Perhaps the problem is that we have to jump in at the deep end. We have such little good religious or spiritual formation to prepare us for suffering or for the discipline of an other-centred practice like meditation. Yet, having lost so much that gives meaning and balance to life, we have to get in the deep end and start meditating when and for whatever reason we can find. Then eventually, if we persevere, we will find that the experience itself teaches us a priceless lesson: to go beyond our experience.

Say you are meditating regularly. Life is calm and regular and has brightness and promise. Then an affliction – death of a loved one, personal loss, separation or rejection, illness - breaks over your life and an iron bolt enters your soul. You keep meditating because the practice – regardless of what part of the growth cycle you may be in at that time – has worked its way into your skin and biorhythms. You are a meditator now: it is as much part of you as breathing. But when you sit down and try to say the mantra your mind seems worse distracted than on your first day at the job. Trailers from scenes that have not yet happened flash through your imagination. Anxiety, grief, anger, sadness are let loose and like a gang of thugs they invade your inner room and wreck your ordered personal space.

You know it's happening and that it will pass. But when? There are moments, like a sunny interval on a stormy day, when you find yourself in the peace of the Lord and you know that joy is ever-rising there. Nevertheless, the battle of thought and feeling is being lost. The turmoil of thoughts is unstoppable because they come from feelings that cannot be controlled. They cannot be reasoned with. We say, 'that's a nonsensical idea' or 'it's not worth worrying about, there's nothing I can do now'. But the feelings in the heart zone and the solar plexus that manifest these thoughts have a life of their own.

In such times we learn why Jesus said 'do not worry, set your troubled hearts at rest, have faith in me', knowing perfectly well how hard that is. Yet for the person of faith it makes a world of difference to remember these teachings. It is so hard to wait without, demands or expectation, fears or hopes, so hard not to plan for an unreal future which first we have to construct imaginatively before we can fantasise about it. It is the unreality of it all that is so heavy. And tiring. We are conflicted: helplessly imagining what might happen, tossed from hope to despair; but also dreading the end of the waiting time because it might actually be the worst we imagined.

Somewhere in all this the mantra is sounding. And something is teaching us.

