

Wednesday Lent Week Three

In the last war, while England was expecting to be invaded as other European countries had been, the government took measures to make things difficult for the enemy when they arrived. They used camouflage on coastal installations, set up a Home Guard of old men and boys with outmoded rifles, which the English today still feel nostalgic about; and they took down all road signposts. It is a funny idea that the mighty German army would have been seriously impeded by not knowing whether to turn right or left at a crossroads in the English countryside.

When I read about this I thought it reflected a feeling we have on any journey of faith – starting a marriage, beginning a new community, finishing the writing of a book or raising children. These are all journeys on which faith – personal commitment and trust - has to deepen at every juncture. And yet, often there are no signposts pointing clearly to reassure us we are on the right road or will take the right turning. Sometimes the signs are there but not very helpfully: like the time my decision-making powers were paralysed. I was driving from Bere Island to Cork. I came to a fork in the road. There *was* a sign. But one side pointed left saying 'Cork' and another pointed right saying 'Cork'.

In the spiritual dimension the path itself is everything. The deeper we go into the silence and let go of words, thoughts and imagination, as we do with the mantra, the fewer conventionally reassuring signs there are. There is simply the path, the way we are treading. And there is the treading, taking the next step. At first we protest at the absence of reassurances and re-confirmation of our direction. Our senses of direction and confidence are challenged or confused.

Slowly we realise that the path itself *is* the reassurance. There comes a sense of relief that there is a way, through the jungle, through the maze of options that overwhelm people today. We have found it. There's a big life-changing difference as we realise that we are on a way. We may feel, too, that it has found us because there is a sense, coming from the road itself, that we are being led by a direct, intimate connection with it. It knows us better than we know it. The connection is simply our treading the path, always taking the next step. *You did not choose me, I chose you... I am the Way.* This sense belongs uniquely to the spiritual dimension. It allows us to follow those stretches of the road that have no signs.

All this might sound flaky and impractical. The sign that it is real is read in daily life, on the parallel pathways of action and decision-making. In material matters there are difficult decisions to make with insufficient time or information. The faith of our inner journey is surprisingly useful here. We don't panic, when necessary we wait and endure better. When we make a decision we have more clarity and make the best choice we can. We trust. If it turns out we were wrong we adjust by direction again.

If we are faithful in the deep issues of the inner journey we will be more faithful in the material issues of life as well.

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I'd like to send this reflection to our community in Italy as they, with their 60 million compatriots are in lockdown because of the coronavirus. All our community worldwide would like you to know that we are thinking of you in these extraordinary days. More than just thinking about you, we are holding you with loving friendship in our hearts at meditation and in our prayers.

It is for you to tell us what you feel and what it is like for you and your families – and we will happily welcome your posts on our website or blog. I will speak with our national coordinator to see if they would like this connection with the wider community. But if I imagine what it must be like for you I think of two comparisons. The first is a Hollywood disaster movie. Much of the media coverage of the pandemic encourages this and indeed the scenes of empty streets and the cancellation of transportation suggests it.

But the other comparison I think of is a retreat that starts in one way and ends in another. The obvious difference is that a retreat is a free choice about how and where we spend our free time. Yet when Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was released from the Gulag forced labour camp where he had been imprisoned for eight years, he said he looked back at it and wept. His tears were a mix of relief at his departure and gratitude for what the camp life had taught him about himself and the human heart. The experience he underwent and the people he met there inspired his books for years to come

Sometimes, when we are forced into something and feel imprisoned by a coldly impersonal, external force, we may burn up in rage at it or go into depression. And yet sometimes, just sometimes if we are fortunate, the experience of being compelled liberates us into new and surprising views of reality. We encounter something unexpected, a hidden grace that could not otherwise have been able to find us.

As in meditation, there are times when we sit in a desert, dry and endlessly distracted by our anxieties or losses. An empty desolation stretches as far as we can feel in every direction. Better, we think, to do something useful or self-indulgent. The solitude is not the open space in which we feel connected to a greater whole but aloneness, constriction, abandonment or the feeling of being forgotten. The spectre of affliction haunts our soul.

Then from an inner point, without location, an invisible ray of light touches and restores our shrivelled soul to life and hope. Not that all our wishes are fulfilled, in fact none of them may be, and the pain or loss may still be only too present. But a joy emerges that opens a pathway to the source of being, our being.

I hope that in some way for all our Italian friends, who are feeling trapped by external forces, some peace of this inner freedom may at least occasionally arise. We hope that the time of the shutdown and quarantine may be short. We hope this for your sake and because the rest of us need the beautiful things - of your temperament and your country - that makes us love you.