

Sunday 27 June: BBC R4 Sunday Worship from St Martin-in-the-Fields

Magnifying the Lord

Readings: John 21.15-19; Ephesians 4.1-7, 11-13

A short time ago I was asked to meet with a young asylum seeker by a counsellor who was working with her. This girl is only 16 years old and in her home country had been through the most terrible brutality and abuse, as violence and fear had torn her country apart. "Tell him what you told me" the counsellor encouraged her. "Every time I go into a church I just start crying. I feel so guilty of all the things I have done. I feel God will punish me and I can't stop remembering." This girl was so young and yet had suffered so much and here she was expressing that religion was increasing her sense of fear and shame. She began to cry "But you **are** the church" I found myself saying. You are the church... We are **all** part of this broken body of Christ. This sixteen year old looks up. "I want to use my life to help other children in need," she says. "That's what I want to do. I want to give..."

Eric Fromm wrote "we become what we are through giving." We give that which is alive in ourselves: we give our joy, our interest, our understanding, our knowledge, we give of our humour, and of our sadness and pain. To deprive someone of the chance to give is perhaps the worst form of poverty.

A few weeks ago about 100 of us left the steps of St Martin-in-the Fields on a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral. It was the twentieth annual pilgrimage aimed at raising money for the Connection at St Martin's and their work with homeless and vulnerable people. As always the pilgrims are a mixture of people from all walks of life some of whom are themselves homeless. On the pilgrimage we sleep and eat in churches and church halls and what is inspiring is the sense of community which emerges for during these four days. There is a real equality. We are no longer defined by where we live or what work we do. Goodness is able to come out of hiding when these barriers are broken down and a new radical generosity of spirit is discovered and reciprocated and so many helpers emerge.

As we walk and talk together it is as though our lives are being opened up and walked into place. When we reach Canterbury I can only describe the other pilgrims as seeming filled with light. The following night when I return home I know that some will be back sleeping on the street. If only we look and see and hear with our hearts - again and again we learn most from those we have previously passed by, or even feared. Together we are the church. The church's real centre is on the edge the place where we all become learners.

Next week I will return to Canterbury to lead a retreat for those preparing for ordination. I know that our faith is not about our own self righteousness or our own power to convert or persuade like some kind of awful religious imperialism. We seek the answers in one another and the lives we live out. Real ministry is to be awakened, awakened to the presence of God in others and that goodness too within our own life as pure gift.

Last week I found myself saying to someone who came to see me who was in trouble and who felt their life was falling apart: "Your guilt is not helping you - you are defeating yourself - your penance is to love." A week later he came back to me: "But I thought penance was a punishment," he said. "Loving is something good." "Yes that's the good news. The greater our need the greater God's love for us." This was Peter's penance after he had betrayed Jesus.

Three times Jesus asked “Do you love me... Do you really love me... do you really love me? Then feed my sheep.” Your penance is to love. I admire Peter the disciple not because he is infallible but because the fallible human Peter is able, even after his triple betrayal, to pick himself up, and have another go and so to be redeemed by love. His failure is not the end of his discipleship but the door through which Christ calls him into a deeper conversion. This is the divine reversal - the God who fills the hungry with good things, who pulls down the proud and lifts up the lowly and whose love is magnified often when we are least expecting to find it.

Magnificat (sung by choir)

Kath Shaljean who began the St Martin’s pilgrimage to Canterbury 20 years ago died last year. She was a person who knew both the pain of life and the healing power of building community. She was in many ways the archetypal wounded healer. She had experienced some pretty dark places herself including the death of a daughter. Kath developed four great gifts for ministry through her work with homeless people. She was genuine, truthful without pretence. Secondly she had an accurate empathy for others. She knew how it was because she had been there herself. Thirdly she had a non possessive warmth and kindness. And finally she was persuasive because if you are going to bring about transformation you are going to have to inspire and convince others. Three months before her death after a very long and brave struggle with a brain tumour Kath wrote “of pulling up the blanket of friends” around her “love persists” she wrote in a poem which speaks what it means to be awakened to one another, the world in which we live and to God.

I Am the Call

I am the call
And you are the wind

I am the bird
And you are the ground beneath

I am the sea
In between the cliffs
As waves move in
To the shore and the lone bird calls

I am the whirling of leaves
As you pass by in the breeze

I am a sparkle of stars
In the firmament

I am a calm lake
And you are the reflection

As a feather drifts down
A sigh goes up from the earth

Aeons on

The water's ripples
Are etched on the sand

Love persists

I am existence
And you are the mystery beyond
I am the call
And you are the answer.