

# The Christian Community

MOVEMENT FOR RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

Forest Row Congregation

Newsletter for Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2020

## What is happening at The Christian Community?

All public events have been cancelled because of the new Coronavirus.

The priests are available by phone or email for pastoral conversations or to give advice about where to find practical help.

We are sending out a weekly newsletter by print and email with spiritual guidance and study material. The priests are celebrating the Act of Consecration of Man at 9am on Thursdays and Fridays and 10am on Sundays. Please join us in spirit.

For more information about The Christian Community, please see our website [thechristiancommunity.co.uk](http://thechristiancommunity.co.uk)

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## Letter

How might this all be if we there was a cut off date to our current emergency situation? How might we live with this if we knew that by such and such a date, everything would be completely over?

Possibly, we might just continue as usual, slightly annoyed and frustrated by current circumstances. We would arrange our diaries so that we could resume normal life after the designated date. Essentially, nothing would change.

But we don't know when this will be over, nor in what guise normality will re-appear. That means that there is actually great potential and possibility for change through this unique experience.

Every now and then in life, 'all the best laid plans' that we make break down, and we find ourselves at a place of 'not knowing'. To take an extreme example: a loved one is in critical condition in hospital, and we don't know how

things will turn out. We simply have to accept 'not knowing'.

This 'not knowing' (which is not the same as ignorance) seems to be the spiritual essence of this experience that we are going through.

This not knowing can be an agony, because naturally enough, we like to know what's going on, and how we can make things fit in with our plans and needs. I imagine that the so-called 'agony in the garden' is a picture of this agony of 'not knowing' (although I see it as a pure archetype of someone without needs, nonetheless in this pre-crucifixion of 'not knowing'). It is where Jesus is left alone by his sleeping comrades; he awaits the soldiers who will arrest him. Does He know how everything will turn out? Does He really already know what Resurrection is? Or is part of this 'not knowing' a necessary stage on the way to the miracle of what happened?

In so many ways today, we as a culture, and as individuals pretend to more knowledge than we actually possess. It can be a precious moment of authenticity when we reveal that we don't actually know.

I am reminded again and again of Kübler-Ross and her fifth stage of dying: the so-called phase of acceptance. Many of us will have gone through various journeys in the past few weeks. We've been angry, denying, bargaining, despairing - all the stages that Kübler-Ross describes that happens when someone is dying. The final stage that she described, that of acceptance, is not merely acceptance that anything goes. It is not resignation. It is a different kind of consciousness: a breakthrough moment. It is a threshold consciousness.

It is a moment where something new may enter. But for most of us, it has to go through the agony of the previous stages before it becomes the glory of our acceptance of not knowing, when we let go of all our prejudices and desires, enter into 'beginners mind', and start to merge into what life wants from us - or as we say in the Act of Consecration, that we 'stand at peace with the world' and unite with its true evolving; or in a more familiar phrase, 'Thy will be done'.

As I suggested earlier, we all know these moments from our own lives. Now all humanity is going through this extraordinary process of 'not knowing' together. We all stand together at the threshold. Will this remain so for a long time? Will it be a new pattern in human existence? We don't know. Will we ever go back to the old normality? Do we want to?

We all have our thoughts or opinions about what has happened. That is simply so. But we can also cultivate the capacity to stand at the threshold of 'not knowing', to endure that

agony, to accept it, and see where it takes us. We might be surprised at what happens.

Christ was once in that garden of Gethsemane in an agony of 'not knowing'; this was transformed into another garden experience: in the garden on that first day of Resurrection when the first fruits of 'not knowing' transformed into a pristine new possibility. How will we tend the gardens of our souls in this time to come? Luke Barr

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## Forty Days of Easter

It might be helpful for some to know that this is still the Easter period. Why? We traditionally prepare for Easter with forty days of Lent. In The Christian Community, this is marked by the four weeks of Passiontide. In this time we have the black as the altar colour. The fourth week of Passiontide is Holy Week.

Then with Easter Sunday, there begins a forty day period leading up to Ascension (always a Thursday). These 40 days mirror the preparation of Lent's lead-up. Just as we have prepared for something, now we need as much time in order to live with it, and allow it time for dialogue with ourselves.

The forty days give us time to appreciate the qualities that we see in nature, which at this time of year, is like a Heaven on earth. We can take the time to explore what Resurrection might have to do with the ethereal beauty that we now experience in nature.

LB

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## Gospel Study on John 15

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.*

*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

*If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfil the word that is written in their law, "They hated me without a cause."*

*When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.*

*This reading ushers in a series of readings from the great outpouring of the word that started at the Last Supper and carried on resounding through the forty days that the apostles spent with the risen Christ. We will be living in this stream now until Whitsun.*

Working with such a passage brings different challenges than for example reading a healing or a short passage from the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps to begin with, we can read it through a few times and allow ourselves to be swept along by the stream of words. We may notice a mantric quality at work in the many repetitions: 'the true vine – the vine-grower – abides in the vine – I am the vine' or 'the Father has loved me – I have loved you – abide in my love' in the first section, or the painful motifs of love and hate, you and me in the third section: 'hates you ... hated me ... would love you ... hates you; hates me and my Father – hated me.'

Once we have immersed ourselves in the passage in this way, we might start to look at some of the motifs that it contains. I am preparing a sermon on the true vine, which I will record on Saturday. I am trying to work out how we can make this available to people without email and internet. There are many other motifs to explore in this reading. Over the last two weeks, we have concentrated on ways of bringing a particular passage to life, first through the lectio divina and then by practising steps that help us to imagine and then enter the scene. For this passage, I will give an example of another approach, where we take a motif and explore its meaning by relating it to the rest of the gospel.

Many of us are familiar with the Gospel of St John as the most sublime of all the gospels with its message of the love of God for the world. It may seem strange to begin with when we notice that a passage like this one speaks so clearly about the world's hatred. John is able to hold his vision of the love of God and its ultimate triumph together with a level assessment of those

aspects of the world and of human beings that turn away from that love.

This starts already in the Prologue, where the tragic note of the darkness not comprehending the light develops into the world that did not know the Word and those human beings who did not receive him. It continues in John 2, when we hear:

*But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.*

How can we reconcile this unsentimental, unwavering awareness of the weaknesses of human beings with the Gospel within the Gospel, which we looked at in last week's study?

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever opens their heart for his being might not be condemned to transitory existence but might have the life that endures into cycles of time. (John 3:16)*

Theologians have puzzled over this long and hard. If God has loved and saved everyone, simply because they are part of the world, what does that do to our picture of human freedom? If freedom is real, does it not mean that God would have to respect our choice to turn away from his love utterly? If we try to narrow it down so that 'the world' really means just the Elect, or those who belong to my church or my race, we do not seem to be doing it justice. There is something about God's love that is world-embracing. Also, it does not take much reflection to notice that there is no church or race or other grouping that consists only of 'good people'.

The Communion prayers in the Act of Consecration of Man can help us to understand this mystery. We pray there we might 'unite with the world's evolving.' The world is the place where evolution in the deepest sense can come about. This evolving is the product of the interplay of progressive and retrograde forces. Our uniting with this world is an imitation of Christ's incarnation: he does not cancel out the struggle of light and dark, but joins us in the midst of it.

As always, if we want this to become more than a theory, the most fruitful starting point is our

own experience. A little self-reflection brings the same discovery that the pupils in the ancient mysteries did: we all have forces within ourselves that are not yet aligned with the progressive forces of evolution. Until we attend to these sides of ourselves and lovingly transform them, they have a monstrous aspect – indeed, they can resist and even hate the Spirit. Once we own all of this within ourselves, we realise that falling out of the stream of the divine love means remaining unchanged and unchanging.

Having explored the passage and the deeper meaning of the 'world' and its hatred, we may find it helpful in the current crisis. Many of us are engaged in research to try to understand what is behind the epidemic. I have read a lot of articles and blog-posts. There is much that I don't know how to assess and I have had to limit my exposure to some things in order to preserve my inner peace. However, I have been trying to observe what I feel I should know best: my own soul-life. When after reading an article I feel that the author has shown me a picture of the world in the grip of evil actors 'out there', I have come to recognise that I will not be helped. Somewhere deep down, I seem to have been enlisted in a group which is implicitly better than these others, because it can see through them. Sometimes this leads to a feeling of disempowerment, because it seems as if the battle has already been lost.

This is quite subtle: I do believe that as concerned citizens we need to form our own opinions and question whatever we read and hear. And I am quite sure that there are deeper aspects to the crisis and the response to it that I need to penetrate with my understanding. However, my reading of John helps me to know that the world is a great mixture of forces, progressive and retrograde, and I count myself as part of this. I know that I am flawed and sometimes weak; I know that I have made bad decisions in my life. I know too that I can sometimes speak words that reach people's hearts, hold a space where a good decision can emerge, and be a vessel for something far greater than myself to work through. I have to count myself among those who hate God as well as among those who love him. This gives me some hope that my struggles to align myself with

God's love, to deal honestly with those around me and try to create true community, and to understand the world in all its piebald glory, will serve

to further the progressive aims of the Spirit.

Coming back to the world and its hatred in our passage, it seems to me that John intends that we notice and own the reality of this mixed and broken world with its mixed and broken human beings, amongst whom we may count ourselves. Only then can we really be touched by a love that knows this reality far better than we do, and unites with everything in it that seeks to grow, to learn, to change. - TR

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## The Christianisation of our Life-Blood



*Master of the Trebon Altar, Prague*

This is one of my favourite representations of the Resurrection, a work of Bohemian Gothic from Prague. It dates from the 14th century. The artist is unknown. At that time, the theme was considered far more important than the ephemeral identity of the artist. He is known only

as the 'Master of the Trebon altar'. The picture is dominated by this strong vibrant red in the shroud (or cloak) of the Risen Christ, in the figure of a prostrate guard, and astonishingly, in the sky.

However, the guard's red is worn and shabby in contrast with the Christ who emanates this heavenly pure and ripened red. His is the red of blood, that all-important blood which is at the centre of Christianity. It is so vigorous - we could imagine that it 'bestows strength', as the Eucharist wine does.

His blood and wounds are still clearly visible. From the wounds flows this red-triumph which enwraps His Resurrection Body. The power of this blood flows into the banner he holds, and the sky reflects the blood-triumph. In the cloak and banner are levity; the spirit flows through, whilst the old world which is bringing this levity to birth, is dull and heavy in comparison.

And behold the marvel of his body! He is as if stretched - as if the new being is waking and stretching with the rising, dawning new sun. Do the feet really stand on that tomb? He seems almost as if smoothly gliding over its surface, as if the body has not yet quite adjusted to its new birth. And so upright, like the banner of triumph that he holds, while all other spears and swords and weapons of human terror are askew.

And near his gentle foot the cruel spike of that shield. But the soldier does not think of his weapons. He can only look. He is the most awake of the four who guard. Awe has not yet awoken in him. It is stupefaction. 'Do I dream?' He seems not yet to be able to even think the question. Perhaps he does dream, and this gives him his sight of that which was not seen by all. He is on that threshold between sleeping and waking, just as Christ is at the threshold of death and life. Perhaps it is this moment of waking, whilst still subject to sleep's heavy compulsion, that permits him the glimpse of the New Life. It is the secret of the threshold which is revealed here. At all of our thresholds, we may perceive Resurrection. We stare unrecognising, hardly able to grasp what it is. And it moves from us, waiting for another time in our lives, another garden of new beginnings when we might look for Him.

What is with our own shields that we lift so quickly in everyday life, almost without thinking, to defend ourselves? We are so used to having to fight in our lives. The defence shield is just part of that everyday mechanism. Does each shield of ours also have a cruel spike in it, that wounds the other while defending ourselves?

The soldiers faces and hands are partly visible. They are covered with armour as far as possible to protect themselves in a deadly world. Their mission is belligerence. Do we recognise ourselves in the stupor of the guards? But He steps forth with unimaginable grace, fine fingers, light emanating from his skin; and his middle, his chest laid bare. The wound is in his middle, the part of us traditionally associated with the heart and breath, the feeling human being. Heart and breath are the essence of our particular prayers at Eastertide. Is this the place where our wounds are too? Can a new light shine forth from our wounds in our middle?

His hands are ready to bestow a peace blessing. They move towards our face, about to touch: The sense of touch, which is so important to the human being. The small child is nourished by touch. Without healthy touch, the child sickens. The final gift from the altar is the peace blessing and its touch. All touch should pour forth love into the world. What is a world without touch?

The cross banner is firmly planted into the tomb. The resurrection is planted into the soil of death, a soil which is specifically for this new body. The tomb looks so heavy. We can feel the heaviness just by looking at those two great handles used to lift the lid.

Death is for us such a burden, it weighs us down with its sombre heaviness. Its lid, so heavy, seems to put an end to our relationships with all those who have been taken by it. How could we possibly lift that lid? No need! Resurrection darts up, perfectly straight, like an unquenchable flame out of the grave.

I can find very little green in this picture. There is some in the trees and hillock behind the Christ. But predominantly, it is a grey dust-world and grey sepulchre from which this new power rises. The red is the colour of the new world. It is the red of human-ness, of our blood. Our blood which can be so passionate and overwhelming.

And yet, the gesture of Christianity is of human blood and life which offers itself; or the human capacity for offering, at whatever level. It is this which is the power which flows into this new world. The heavens have even been permeated through with this red impulse. They had always been represented as gold in icon painting. Now gold stars shine through a red, a human heaven. The heavens are as if rejoicing and exulting in this victory.

There is a tradition that Archangels accompany our progression through time. And just as now is the age of the Angel Michael, so then in the 14th century, it was the age of Anael, the angel associated with Mars, the planet of War. The golden skies of the icon painters at that time became replaced by the brilliant red of Mars. Mars was being Christianised. The impulse of Mars and war in the human being was being transformed by Christ. And out of this transformation was born the re-birth of Humanism, the Renaissance.

Has Mars been entirely Christianised in us? It seems that each one of us must still work on our own bellicosity. And can the same be said for our cultural responses in this critical period of time? Do we today need to wage war on death? Do we need to join the fight against the invisible viruses? Do we need to keep our shields up, our protective armour on, visors down, sword at the ready to keep others at a distance? Or do we need to embrace the threshold that has now come to us all? Do we need to be able to learn to behold the threshold where the Risen One is moving? Do we need a new uprightness with which to judge for ourselves what the right thing to do in any situation is? Do we need a free middle space with which to relate freely to the world? One that relates with compassion, because it itself emanates from a wound. Do we not need to touch each other with our peace, with our love? Can human beings grow or be nourished without touch? Can our touch bestow blessing?

Should we fight the virus? Or should we bless it? What might happen then?

All these things can be pondered upon as we live within our own silent extended Holy Saturday now. How will we bring Resurrection and the

Risen One to the world, when we return to our lives?

-LB

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## Living with the Act of Consecration of Man (6)

### Words that Make a Difference

Immediately after they heard John the Baptist's preaching, his listeners asked him: 'What then shall we do?' (Luke 3:10) The first Christians felt the same. Bearing witness to the truth of the gospel meant embracing a radical change in their way of living and worshiping. This decision could have the most serious consequences. Even in peaceful times, joining the church resembled an initiation with a long preparation, which reached its climax in the night of Holy Saturday. After confessing their sins and receiving an exorcism, the candidates undressed. They were immersed in the baptismal water three times. Each time they were raised out of the water, they were asked: 'Do you believe in the Father – in the Son – in the Holy Spirit?' Three times time they answered: 'I believe!', in Latin: *credo*. That was the origin of the creeds as they are still recited in the churches today.

Following the Gospel Reading in the Act of Consecration of Man, the priest removes the stole and stands just as they were when they entered the church for their own Ordination, which demonstrated their commitment to make their life into an act of confession to Christ. The Creed which the celebrant speaks after the Gospel Reading has a different character to most of the rest of the service. Its language is not that of prayer; it is a statement. We do not ask that the Father may be the ground of being, or that the Christ may be his Son. Nor do we pray that the Holy Spirit may enlighten us. The affirmation 'Yea, so it is!' is an affirmation. Reciting the Creed is an act of faith, as this was understood in the time of Jesus. In the ancient world, faith was seen as a statement of loyalty and commitment to the spiritual world rather than an assent to facts that could not be grasped by the intellect alone, as it tends to be seen today. Such an attitude still lives on in terms such as 'faithful'.

If we live intensely with the gospel, we might find that the question: 'What can we do?' rises up in us. The Creed provides one possible answer: 'Bring the fundamental truths of Christianity to life in your soul so that you can bear witness to them in thought, word and deed.'

The Creed gives an outline of the history of the world as the story of creation, redemption and sanctification or consecration. A unitary divine being is both the origin and the destination of the world – the ground of all being. If we explore the image of 'ground', we find that it is the foundation on which everything else rests. It can also mean the 'grounds', the reason for something. God as the ground includes the origin and the purpose of the world. Affirming that this ground is 'spiritual-physical' challenges us to seek the archetypes and formative forces of our sense-perceptible world within this ground.

Making this real for ourselves is a historic challenge. For centuries, human beings have divided the world in two. This division first became apparent in decisions about the nature of God and the world that were taken by the Church in the fourth century. The world that we can perceive with our senses was declared to be outside the realm of divine creativity. In the space that this created, the materialistic world-view took hold ever more strongly. The logic of materialism denies not only the idea of a creator-god but also the idea of their being any purpose or overriding direction in the process of creation and evolution. To recognize the ground of all being at work in everything, to overcome every division in our thinking – that is the challenge of the first sentence of the Creed.

This has practical consequences. If we regard our practical duties as necessary evils, instead of carrying them out with attention and love, we are perpetuating the division. Living in alignment with the Ground of the World could also mean finding harmony with all aspects of my own being. If we accept this challenge, our prayers to the Ground of the World will become ever more substantial.

When we try to imagine the eternal birth of the Son from the womb of the Ground of the World, our inner gaze turns from the world of being to that of becoming. Birth is something that

happens at a point of time: there is a before when it has not yet happened and an afterward when it is over. The image of the eternal birth challenges us to embrace the reality of the Son of God, whose essence is becoming. The fate of the principle of becoming itself, which encounters a world whose ideas and forms have become rigid, is summarized in the sentences about Jesus' birth, death and resurrection. Living with the gospels can help us to bring these short sentences of the Creed alive.

The final sentences summarise the working of the Holy Spirit. He is the great connector, the medium that joins Father and Son in their eternal communion. When we contemplate the reality of the spiritual world; when we pray; when we turn our attention to the things of the created world, the great connector is at work in us. To acknowledge the reality of the divine world not only in thought but also in deed means that we willingly join in this great current of communication.

Participating in the Act of Consecration of Man is an act of confession. The more we accompany the words and actions of the service inwardly, the more real this becomes. In the Transubstantiation we ask Christ to bless this confession of the will. As we approach Communion, we make a twofold confession to the divine world. Before receiving the bread, we confess our situation as those suffering from the sickness of sin. Before receiving the wine we make a positive confession to Christ and to the Ground of the World that is revealed through him. Our work with the Creed can fill these moments with ever deeper meaning.

In the Easter prayers we hear a clear call to confess Christ's death and resurrection as the 'meaning of the earth'. Many people feel a certain shyness about telling other people about their spiritual experiences. We may have noticed how easily precious words such as God, Christ, or salvation can become mere phrases. However, we also encounter many situations in which the right word can be a comfort for people who feel overwhelmed by the apparent meaninglessness of their suffering or of world events. A gentle tact is needed here and we may wait a long time before naming Christ. But if we are attuned to

others' needs and try with halting words to convey our conviction that meaning is inscribed deep into the fabric of all being, that failure and death can be the place of new life – then we fulfil our task of proclaiming the meaning of the earth. And even if we feel inadequate or have to experience rejection: is it not worthwhile to endure such petty troubles when we try to confess Jesus

Christ, who died bearing witness to the meaning of the earth?

- TR

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## Supporting us

The Christian Community is funded by contributions by members and friends. In this time of crisis, when the priests' work is needed more than ever, we are facing a fall in our income through reduced collections and fundraising events.

If you are able, please consider taking out a standing order or increasing your existing one.

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## Receiving the Newsletter

Due to the cost of printing and posting paper copies, we will only post the newsletter to people who have informed us that they wish to receive it. If you received this newsletter by post, please write to us at the church to let us know if you would like to continue to do so.

Alternatively, you can sign up for the email version of the Newsletter. There's more material in there than we manage to print, and you can download a printable copy if you prefer to read off-screen.

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