

# The Christian Community

MOVEMENT FOR RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

Forest Row Congregation

Newsletter for Sunday, 10<sup>th</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

In this time of massive global transition, many of us find ourselves unsettled. Because it is a great transition, it can feel like the ground is being taken from beneath our feet. The way things have been for so long, may no longer hold. There is so much conflicting information and opinion out there, and it is difficult to know really what is going on. Even those who are seeing something of what is happening will be affected by how they have been trained to interpret and think about what they are seeing and experiencing. 'Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold' wrote WB Yeats in his prescient poem, 'The Second Coming'. Why are we going through this unsettling time of transition?

It may be helpful to think of the 40 days of Resurrection as the archetype of all transitions. Resurrection has come in order to spiritually reverse the inevitable slide of the world into what the creed calls, 'the death of matter'. It is Resurrection which makes transitions at all possible. We can entertain the thought that without the Christian Mystery (I don't wish to use the term 'Christianity'), change would not be truly humanly possible. Is this feasible? What a radical thought! Difficult though transitions and change may be, we can be thankful for them.

In the Act of Consecration, it is the Transubstantiation (the transformation of bread and wine into body and blood) which is the heart of the service, and which represents this difficult aspect of transition and transformation. Only by practicing repeatedly in life (whether through ritual or through everyday experiences) how to go through such transformation, can we prepare ourselves enough for the what the times are demanding of us now.

These 40 days are like a great Transubstantiation in nature. Normally, nature transubstantiates alchemically below the surface in Winter. We do not see its activity. It is hidden from us as nature's holiest secret. But in Spring, something miraculous happens. The transformational process becomes apocalyptic

for a time: that is, it 'reveals itself' to us. And for 40 days, we watch in astonishment as nature performs her alchemical dance before our profane sight.

Forty is a number which repeatedly appears in the Bible as a magical time-period - a cycle of time -which holds great secrets. In 40 days, you can change a habit effectively, if you have the resolve to do so. This changing of a habit is a way of safely and gradually entering into our life forces, where health and illness live in constant relationship with each other.

It is in these 40 days, that we can learn to 'see' Christ, perhaps as those first disciples did. We can do so, because he now lives in the life forces. And these forces manifest most openly in Spring. He is 'the Lord of the Heavenly forces on Earth, and lives as the fulfiller of the Fatherly deeds' of the ground of our world.

In these 40 days, when the ground of our world has been shaken, we can search for the fulfiller of the 'new ground' of the world. We can search for him most readily in the 'heavenly forces on earth' which is nature's resplendent glory all around us. Even a rainy day in May is a joy!

We must read the papers and know what is going on. But we need a healthy balance to counteract their dry abstraction and their appeal to the sensational. Our 'spiritual-physical' immune system must be enhanced by the forces of Resurrection. How? Look at nature in these 40 days. When we meditate what we are permitted to perceive and experience there, we will have the basis for much of what we need to truly sustain us. The nation 'will be fed' not by supermarkets, but by beautiful nature and its generous spiritual abundance. And it is all (still) free.

One can have the feeling when looking at the work of Vincent van Gogh that he could experience these pure love forces of Resurrection in nature. His paintings are always moving somehow. They are alive with these abundant forces. It is as if he is able in nature, to grasp for a moment the being who said 'noli me tangere' (do not hold me). Perhaps his own tragedy was that these forces overwhelmed his sensibilities.

Here in nature, a love of what we experience will provide us with 2 things: the right relationship to nature (not an abstract 'politically correct' attitude from an armchair - but a real, localised one with the 'spirit of the place'); and a foundation to learn to perceive the Christ as the 'Lord of the heavenly forces on earth' where he now lives. Then Resurrection will not be some strange theological concept, nor some leftover pagan nature-symbolism, but can gradually become a personal experience.

Luke Barr

## After Corona

We are living through something quite extraordinary. It is part of our lives, and in some way, we have all said 'yes' to coming to the earth and being here when this event occurred. What lives in this 'yes' that we all said?

We would like to invite you to consider writing something about how you experience the world crisis and what this tells you about life. What will be important for you when we 'return'? What in your life, in our community life in the church,

what in the wider community, or national or worldwide level

If you would like to share something, please send it to us for inclusion in the forthcoming newsletters. However, please try and find a way to share it as succinctly as possible! We will copy-edit your contribution and we may shorten it. We may not be able to include every contribution that is submitted.

- Luke and Tom

## Homily on John 16

Tom Ravetz

*Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*

John 16

In a beautiful passage from the Book of Proverbs, the being of wisdom, the creative principle of the world, speaks:

“The Lord created me first of all, the first of his works, long ago... I was beside him like an architect, I was his daily source of joy.”

Joy is written into the fabric of creation. When God beholds what he has done on each of the days of creation, saying ‘[[It was good,’ might he be feeling the joy that is spoken of here?

Our experience of joy is more intermittent than this. It comes unexpectedly. In fact if we try to grasp it, it eludes us, as Blake expressed so beautifully:

He who binds to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy;  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

When we experience it, though, we know that it belongs to us, or we belong to it – perhaps because it aligns us with God's joy in creation.

Two things make us close us off from joy. The weight of the past can crush us under our guilt about mistakes that we have made and hurts that we have inflicted. We may also feel trapped by the consequences of the actions of others. On the other hand, when we worry about the future, we can miss the joy that is available in every moment. Etty Hillesum found access to this joy even in the transit camp of Westerbork, as she

was about to be sent to Auschwitz, where she died: ‘Despite everything, life is full of beauty and meaning.’

The Easter prayers tell us that our heart and lungs are now organs of joy. In their natural, biological functioning, heart and lungs mediate between past and future. The blood that returns from our extremities bears within it the memories of the actions we took in the world and the things we have experienced there. The blood that is enlivened by the new breath in the chambers of the heart, bears our impulses for action within it as it goes out into the limbs. Small wonder that this place of dying and rising again can perceive the joy of the resurrection!

Do sadness and grief have an opposite? If they do, it is not joy; perhaps this is what happiness means. The joy that Christ promises can be ‘grave and steady’\*. Its roots take hold in all the suffering and evil of the world; it grows from them like a precious flower. Attending to the Easter pulse of breath and heart, letting go of the past and living with openness and wonder for what streams towards us from the future, we may develop a grave and steady gaze for the darkness and suffering of the world. Then our Easter eyes may rejoice to see the birth pangs of the new that wants to come into the world in all that afflicts us and our world.

\* William Wordsworth: Star-Gazers

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## Thinking that Lives in the Life of the Healing Spirit

Luke Barr

I suppose it would be true to say (although I am no scientist and have never really witnessed this with my own senses) that a virus can make you ill. But it seems to me that the thing that really makes us ill, lies elsewhere. It is in our soul life. All the ups and downs of the soul - surely it is this which causes health and illness to vacillate in many of us?

There are other important factors of course in keeping healthy: proper healthy nutrition (not calorie counting!), purposeful activity for the limbs, normal exercise of the body, a rhythmical structure to life, a sense of meaning in life even if

one cannot articulate it exactly (who can?!) All these are vital.

But I think that when we have fear in the soul, or highs and lows in quick succession, or a feeling that we have no future, then that will pretty much guarantee that we become ill sooner or later. When we are restricted from our usual will life - well, this could be a blessing for some, but a terrible burden for others; when our feelings are repeatedly permeated by confusion and fear; when our thinking is subjected to one thing and one thing only. Then we can't help but become ill.

Our thinking has recently been exposed to one major theme. Every day, we receive so much differing information: statistics, numbers, graphs. We use our thinking to digest these figures and the information that accompanies them.

I don't know how you are faring, but sometimes, I find that my thinking simply can't encompass all the information and all its contradictions. And I become almost blank and exasperated. I experience the limits of my thinking - and that, strangely enough, is actually quite a healthy discovery to make.

One of the important things about facing our current situation is knowing what role our thinking has to do with all this; and how we could affect it all just with the power of our thinking. I posit that there is a thinking form which is far healthier and fulfilling than the type of thinking that most of us use in everyday life. How can we cultivate it?

You may well recall that at a vital part of the Transubstantiation, the Act of Consecration calls upon us to take what we have heard and witnessed 'into our thinking', and that there these things may 'live'.

One of the intriguing things that Rudolf Steiner said about thinking is that it emanates from our life body; from the very forces we use to build up our body and which maintains and transforms it constantly. Thinking is an offshoot, a product of these forces. The 'thinking' forces are intimately bound up with our 'living' forces. And our thinking is deeply connected to our health and ill-health in our life body. That means that the way we think determines much (not all!) of how healthy or ill we are in life.

That may be a shock to some - but it may feel quite obvious to others, or liberating and empowering to still more. How we think determines our health to a large degree. This begins with true positive thinking (not a self-deceiving positivity) where one endeavours to find the positive potential in all things. It continues with kindness towards oneself and others: kindness and magnanimity of thinking. Then we do not categorise and 'make small' others, but allow for their growth, by emancipating them in our thinking. This applies to how we think about ourselves as well of course.

And the list of positive ways of thinking goes on and on, from imbuing our thinking with gratitude so that thinking and thanking become as one; to learning to forgive, to be open, learning to learn - and so on. There is good healthy inner work there for a lifetime!

We know what the effects of constant negativity are on the soul. We may occasionally witness it in ourselves or in others. We may know people who are embittered and cynical or sarcastic. It is difficult to feel well in the presence of cynicism, sarcasm, contempt or anger. We might be with someone like that for a visit and feel we have to go home and shower or sweat the experience out with some rigorous exercise!

But positive thinking will make us healthier people. But not for our own sakes (as some kind of perverse protection against this unfortunate, vilified virus), but for the sake of the 'bigger picture'. I truly believe that if we engage with this thinking properly, then we can ultimately move towards our own inevitable deaths without fear, but with integrity and dignity - and gratitude even. This would be a great gain for our current civilisation.

Death will then not threaten to take everything from us when it comes - but will learn something from us.

Apparently, recent research demonstrated that the most intelligent way to think is to do so with a sense of authentic reverence and wonder. These qualities are sources of true 'intelligence' in the human soul. How is it when we approach the virus with awe; or we encounter other opinions different from our own (there are

plenty of those around these days!) with reverence? Evidently, we have much space to practice in, at present. Perhaps we need it.

How would it be if more of our public servants, the politicians, were clearly living with meditative work that cultivated genuine reverence in them? Would we not trust them a great deal more? But we should not start with others, but with ourselves. Our own soul is the only beginning point for making a healthier world.

There are other references to thinking in the Act of Consecration. I am thinking (!) of one that occurs during the Offering. We have demonstrably offered up our willing and feeling with the substances of wine and water; and then we turn to the altar once more and with the chalice in hand which holds the wine and water, we ask that our 'thinking live in the life of the Holy Spirit' into the future cycles of time.

One could say that the chalice is equated here with our thinking. That is, our thinking is the container that holds our consciously offered willing and feeling.

Can we craft our thinking to be like this beautiful Grail-like chalice? Can our disciplined, meditative thinking become a receptacle to take hold of and contain our constantly over-spilling willing (wine) and feeling (water) life? Can our thinking develop a dynamic which is offering in gesture, instead of an egoistic self-oriented one? Can we think differently to the fearful thought-forms that are daily being served up to us ten times before breakfast?

If so, we will have a healthy thinking life, one that passes frequently over the threshold to the spiritual world and brings back nourishment for us all on this side of the threshold. We will then indeed be cultivating a 'healing spirit' life in our thinking and in the wider world - when our thinking lives in the life of the holy, healing spirit.

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## Violin Marathon

Angela Campbell did a sponsored eight-hour violin play on Saturday, May 2nd to raise money for The Christian Community. Angela is a professional musician who studied at the Royal Academy of Music and was one of the only

female violinists to play in the English National Ballet back in the day. She touches the hearts of everyone she knows with her passion, creativity and teaching. Attempting this task aged 75 is no mean feat and she braved this task in the safety of her home in Forest Row, to the audience of her music loving cats and many plants and birds.

Many people have already contributed and there is a bulging collection box ready to be banked to support our congregation's finances.

If you're sad because you missed the opportunity of sponsoring her, don't worry! You can still donate via our website (<http://www.thechristiancommunity.co.uk/2020/05/01/violin/>) to sponsor Angela and support The Christian Community in this difficult time. Please choose 'Violin marathon' in the drop-down list. Please note that you don't need a PayPal account to use this facility – just choose 'pay with a card' to use your bank card. Alternatively, you can drop an envelope with your contribution through the letterbox at the church.

Thank you, Angela!

Luke and Tom

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## Living with the Act of Consecration of Man (7)

### Preparing to Make an Offering

Tom Ravetz

Once the chalice has been uncovered, we pray that the Ground of the World will receive our offering. Only the deepest trust that we are connected to the ultimate ground of all being allows us to speak such a prayer.

In the next moment, the priest describes himself as an 'unworthy creature'. Some people struggle to identify with this description of human beings. The free, healthy human spirit rebels against such a picture.

If we look into our souls, we may find much that is worthy along with much that is not. As much as we can experience ourselves as creative, free and loving, we also experience fundamental

problems that set limits on this love, freedom and creativity. A picture of ourselves that only included one side of this tension would not do justice to our experience.

Owning our limitations can motivate us to live with them creatively. We learn to recognise when we are out of alignment with ultimate reality, when we deny the reality of the spirit and when we allow our weaknesses to govern us. Such moments create blockages in our souls. Part of the challenge of thinking of reality as a whole, which we have looked at in relation to the Creed, is to realise that these blockages are real and not just subjective. As we prepare for the Offering, we can seek to release everything that brings us out of alignment and allow it to flow towards ultimate reality.

Preparing for the first part of the Offering can help us to experience it more deeply when we are in the service. The old theological concepts can be a help here, if we can free ourselves from their moralizing overtones. Paul's letters contain 'catalogues' of sins which were summarised in the Middle Ages as the seven deadly sins ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven\\_deadly\\_sins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_deadly_sins)), or perhaps more accurately, the capital vices. Vices are deep predispositions which are beyond our conscious control. They make us susceptible to temptations that in turn lead to sin, which means that we incur guilt. When we are confronted with our guilt, we may feel so crushed that we freeze up inwardly. Perhaps we cannot see any prospect ever of being able to put things right. Over time, however, we may realize that surrendering to despair is of as little use to the world as frivolously ignoring our strayings into sin and refusing to learn from them. In the moral theology of the Middle Ages, such despair is called *acedia*, which can be described as a spiritual laziness. However, the feeling of guilt can become the driving force of a renewed will to learn from life. Our responsibility is to review our mistakes so honestly that we can wrest from them every possible insight, in order that we can go back into life wiser and more compassionate.

The Sacramental Consultation gives us the opportunity actively to allow the blockages that have formed in us to flow to the divine world, so that we become receptive to the blessing that

streams towards us during the service. We may be aware of things that we have said or done because of our limitations, or old ideas that we have developed in order to shield ourselves from aspects of reality that we do not wish to confront. These can be spoken out in the Consultation, and we can attain a kind of release. When we prepare ourselves for the Act of Consecration of Man, we can ask ourselves what still burdens us, what has not yet flowed away from us to the Ground of the World. From such self-reflection we can also judge whether a Sacramental Consultation could be helpful.

In our personal religious life this inner work on the consequences of sin can be helped by praying the Lord's Prayer, particularly the sentence about trespass or debt. The Greek word *aphes*, which is translated as 'forgive', originally meant 'to send away' or 'to let go'. When we prepare for the Act of Consecration of Man, it can be a help to reflect on the debts which we have incurred. These include the results of our mistakes, which are expressed by the word 'trespass'. We are also indebted simply by living in an interconnected world. What needs to happen so that I can get up in the morning and find electricity when I switch the light on, clean streets, people who will look after me if I get ill, and the infrastructure that delivers my food and water? These are debts that are incurred without my personal guilt. Awareness of this web of debt can help us if we become too preoccupied with the areas where we feel what others owe us something and with the wrongs that we feel that we have suffered. All this serves to deepen our participation in the Offering.

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## Sermon on John 15

Tom Ravetz

Saint Paul tells us that when we join the congregation, we are grafted onto a new rootstock. We can experience this in every Act of Consecration of Man. Our common purpose unites us: to join with spiritual beings in hallowing the human, consecrating each soul who attends the service. Hearing the gospel melds us into one soul that raises itself to Christ. In the Transubstantiation, this soul can do what

none of us could achieve on their own: it recognises Christ in bread and wine, knowing him in freedom.

In receiving communion, we are grafted onto the grapevine again. After receiving communion, we turn our attention to discerning how long it remains a vivid experience for us. In these days when we are not able to attend the church outwardly, this exercise in discernment can become all the more important. Perhaps we can remember the last time we stood at the altar and received communion. The painful loss that we are experiencing through staying away can serve to highlight what is always true: when we drink from the cup, we are being grafted in yet again to the life of Christ, which flows through his church. We are not grafted onto the grapevine in order that we will stay in the church permanently. Soon after those brief and precious moments of receiving communion, we return to the world. The communion creates an invisible, spiritual connection, which is to endure, inspiring all that we do and are in the world.

The point of the branches of the grapevine is not that they live on the vine and grow ever larger for their own sake. They are there to make it possible that the leaves can grow, the flowers can develop, and the fruit can be harvested. We are grafted onto the vine so that we can carry the life of Christ into the world and allow it to become fruitful. This is how the Father is glorified, when we allow the life of the Son to flow through us. Then, our lives become truly fruitful. This is the promise of the True Vine: that he will allow his life to flow when we so align ourselves, so that we will feel his support. Knowing that we are part of the community that is striving to make this real can be a great comfort for us, even when we are not in church.

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## Sermon on John 10

### I am the Door – the ‘I am’ is the Door

Doors have always had a mysterious, transformative power.

Doors create boundaries – barriers or markers that divide inner from outer, outer from inner.

Such boundaries are the precondition of all life and development. Without cell-walls, the life of the simplest single-celled organism would be swamped by the water in which it lives. Without the clear boundary marked by closing the door and ringing the bell, the spiritual power of Act of Consecration of Man would be dispersed.

However, if it is impermeable, the boundary-wall becomes a prison. For life to unfold within the cell-walls, there has to be an exchange of substances between the inside and the outside.

The boundary around the Act of Consecration of Man is also permeable. Through the course of the service, we invite the whole of humanity, all those who have died, and all the ranks of spiritual beings to assist us in celebrating.

The power of the door lies in the fact that we can change its state. If it were only open, it would be a break in the boundary, which could be dangerous for the life inside. If it were only closed, its protection would become a fetter on life.

When we think back to our first experience of ourselves as an ‘I’, we may well remember a time when we had to find our self, perhaps against resistance: to uphold our own being, maybe when others were trying to influence us against our will. To find ourselves, we needed to be able to go inside and shut the door.

There is another aspect of our ‘I’. If we think back to moments when we felt most at one with our true self, they will often be times when we gave ourselves fully to a task or to a deep encounter. We find ourselves by opening ourselves to the world. These days of enforced inactivity are a challenge, particularly for those of us with active, restless natures. Will we be able to bear the quiet loneliness of the inside?

‘The I am is a door’ – this word of Christ has a particular resonance this year, when we are experiencing the ‘lockdown’. Last Sunday, we heard how the disciples locked themselves away for fear. Their inner liberation happened through Christ’s presence among them, even in their fear, even in their locked down state. Suddenly, the closed door changed from being their refuge to being the necessary boundary around an inner space, in which the spirit of the whole world could become present.

St Paul's famous phrase: 'Not I but Christ in me' (Galatians 2:20) is actually part of a longer passage. Paul describes a powerful experience of death: he, who had lived his life according to the law, to what was right and wrong, experienced that this brought him to a dead end. Then comes one of the most astonishing sentences in the whole Bible: 'I have been crucified with Christ'. The experience of death – of futility, of failure, of getting it wrong – leads to a breakthrough. A door opens. Paul continues: 'and it is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me.'

The story of Holy Week, which has its climax in the crucifixion, is the story of the collision of two kinds of power [death]. It is likely that Palm Sunday saw two triumphal entries: Pilate would have marched at the head of the occupying army from his residence on the coast, in order to enforce a semblance of peace on his troubled province during the great festival of Passover, when the population of Jerusalem swelled many times over. On the other side of the city, the power of self-giving, sacrificial love was embodied in Jesus' donkey-ride. All through the week, the power of fear and control – what St Paul sums up as the law in all its forms – tries to crush the power of self-bestowing love. It has to be said that a neutral observer of both events would have seen the glittering display of military might as rather more convincing than the humble entry of an itinerant preacher from the unfashionable end of the Holy Land. However, when we celebrate Easter, we affirm that Pilate's power was limited, because in the end it could only deal out death. The death of the one who seemed sure to be obliterated gave rise to a new power of life, a power great enough to change the course of history.

A question I have been living with is whether it makes a difference if we take as our starting point the fact that the Resurrection has actually happened. Would this take away some of our fear? Open inner doors that were threatening to shut us in? What would happen if we knew that the reality of creative, self-giving love is already written into every atom of our world? Would our assessment of current events change if we knew that the deepest motivation of every spiritual and human being is ultimately to align themselves to the power of that love? If we

understood that everything that afflicts us is in the end the foil for our courage – courage to break down whatever gates of hell we have closed upon ourselves? That whatever dark forces may be at work, whatever schemes and stratagems we fear, it will turn out that the powers behind them 'meant it for evil, but God meant it for good'?

The indwelling Christ, who has taken up residence in the Holy of Holies of the human soul, leads us through death into life. He is the comforter in all our earthly experience, because he has shown the outcome of the battle between the powers.

Both the above sermons were recorded and can be heard via the 'blog' of The Christian Community – see <http://www.thechristiancommunity.co.uk/topic/blog/>

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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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