

The Christian Community

MOVEMENT FOR RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

Forest Row Congregation

Newsletter for Sunday, 7th June, 2020

Letter

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8)

For centuries, theologians have battled over the question of providence and free will.

Does God know everything that is going to happen in advance? What space would that leave for human freedom? But if we are really free to choose, does that mean God's power has limits?

These questions might seem abstract, but they become pressing when we are afflicted by evil and unearned suffering. In these weeks of the health crisis, we may feel aware that decisions by politicians and officials – now and in the past – have led to the outcomes that we have experienced, good and bad. Was this all preordained? If that were so, would there be any sense in holding people responsible for their actions?

Strangely, the old doctrine of divine providence and its extreme form of predestination finds a continuation in the current picture that we are determined by our biology – by genetic code and instinct. This mechanistic picture lies behind modern medicine, and if we feel uneasy about aspects of the response to Covid-19, it may have its roots here. All public health measures rest on statistical modelling. This in turn rests on a picture of the human being that says we are predictable and in a way controllable. However much this may be part of the truth, our soul rebels when it is reduced to the level of Pavlov's dogs. As much as we are glad that responsible planning goes on, we also resent the idea that we could be subject to a plan that can predict exactly what will happen.

Paul challenges us to invert our thinking about God's plan. We make plans before we embark on a project. The plan is in the past, and as we try to do our work we will find that we fulfill the plan to a greater or a lesser degree. As long as we are bound by the plan, we are bound to be disappointed with the result, because the reality never matches the plan perfectly.

Such a way of looking at things has its place, of course, for instance if we are engaged in a building project. However, even here the architect's wonderful plans always have to be modified in the light of the conditions the builders find once they start their work. In the human realm, we may take on responsibility for an event – a lesson, a work-day, an artistic group. We prepare carefully the evening before; we might even come with a lesson plan. Then we encounter the reality. Before the session starts, some interruption happens, or perhaps someone in the group is determined to divert things along a pathway they found important. Following our plan would be impossible. As we gain experience, we notice that the main point of the plan was that we could tear it up. Afterwards, we see that what felt like a worrying diversion allowed us to discover what this lesson, this session, this

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

group work actually wanted to be about, perhaps because to begin with at least it all seems to have gone wrong. This demands of us that we develop a new way of seeing: we strive to sense the plan as it reveals itself from the future. This instills the confidence that whatever we encounter will turn out to be purposeful, if we develop the right way of seeing.

When we think of God's plan for the world, we are challenged to feel a mind that can embrace everything that is – Paul's 'all things'. All the past choices have led to the this moment with its unique possibilities. The work of the Holy Spirit is constantly to renew the plan in the light of all that has come about. Then, everything can be integrated into the plan that leads to the freedom of creatures to decide to give themselves in love. When we decide to align ourselves with God's creative purpose, we do something that no statistical model could predict: the free, creative deed. Then we can look at the world fair and square, good and evil, and find the certainty that ultimately all things work together for the good.

- Tom Ravetz

Gospel Study – Romans 8

Luke Barr

Whitsun, the flame of the human spirit, appears for three short days. In its heavenly archetype, it is a great fanfare in heaven. In its reality on earth, it is not 'as it is in heaven'. It is a tender flame and one which perhaps may be threatened with being extinguished. It is the bringer of true healing to humanity. Our struggles for freedom, our struggles to utter worthy speech, our struggles to live with ourselves, and with others: all these are part of the healing spirit which wishes to reveal human beings as we truly are. For we are actually Spirit.

The flame burns for three days at Whitsun, and then is taken within, sheltered by our protective hand. We take that guarded flame to the altar when we light the seven candles at the beginning of the Act of Consecration. It is carried by the server to light the candles - because each of us who is present in one way or another, is holding that Whitsun flame within themselves, the flame of the human spirit.

We are the 'first fruits of the Spirit', Paul writes in this famous passage from the Letter to the Romans. Paul speaks to the Roman within us: the urge to conquer the world; to set our mark upon the world; to create our collective or individual law and order that will last forever. Do we not wish everyone to abide by our own way of doing and seeing things? Don't we wish to be always right; to be the 'little caesar' of our world? Paul asks us to see ourselves differently than little kings and queens vying for domination over each other and over our patch of earth and the body that we inhabit. He asks us to see ourselves as 'fruit'. The 'first fruit'. To the spirit world, we are the first ripening fruit of nature. Out of all the long cycles of time that brought forth a condensed material world - now the ripening process begins, and the first fruit appear to the spirit world. It is us.

Our spirit is not something that is 'regrettably' caught in nature, and wishes to release itself from nature

(which is the motivation of most addictions). The task of our spirit is to accept and love and redeem nature. To do so means also accepting, loving and redeeming death, as it manifests naturally.

And nature will one day follow us in our spiritual journey. We must lead the way; we must, as spirit, enlighten their path.

This reading from Paul, so unusual in the course of the year, has a special place at this time. There is something so moving in reading this nature epistle directly after the festival of Whitsun.

If misunderstood, we might at Whitsun develop a hubris about the human spirit. We cannot just dream of the promise of the human spirit, of what we might become. Immediately following the glory of the human spirit at Whitsun comes this complimentary voice from nature: 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now'. All of nature waits for the human being to realise their true nature. All of nature endures those endless days and nights where we human beings remain human beings and neglect our human spirit; where we are merely concerned with ourselves and our attachments to our problems. The human spirit is wedded to the earth and nature. We are, in the words of the Creed, spiritual-physical. It seems to me that Spirit does not perceive the world as Maya, as illusion, but as something which calls out for redemption, for being part of the process that the first fruits are undergoing too.

How wonderful at Whitsun that we do not lose ourselves in that burning glory of the festival, but immediately turn with our warmth and light to our sisters and brothers in nature, who are so dependent upon we human beings, who are the so-called crown (or corona) of nature.

Living with the Act of Consecration (11)

Communion

Tom Ravetz

Since time immemorial, human beings have sought to commune with the spiritual world in ritual meals. The first three parts of the Act of Consecration of Man serve to prepare the meal that we share with the divine world. Every gospel reading announces that Christ is coming, as healer, teacher or radical transformer of human experience. In the Offering, we make space in our soul to welcome the guest. When a beloved friend whom we have not seen for many years comes to visit, we may find that we both fall silent for a moment when we first meet. The very fact of being together makes all the difference. In the silent moments in the heart of the Transubstantiation we can experience the same quality of encounter. All of this prepares us for the meal that we share with Christ. When we share a meal with our friends, we find nourishment beyond the food that we eat: the encounter itself feeds us. What we share becomes a part of us. (I am indebted to Hans-Werner Schroeder, who gives a longer version of this 'parable' in a booklet on the Act of Consecration of Man.)

I stand at peace with the world.

In the farewell discourses (John 14-17), Jesus prepares his disciples for the trials they will have to face in the world, and comforts them: 'But be not afraid: I have overcome the world.' (John 16:33) Christ holds the powers in check that seek to tear us out of our connection with the Ground of all Being. His descent into the depths of earthly experience, culminating in the crucifixion, exposes him to the dimensions of experience that are furthest from the divine world. His peace with the world stems from his affirmation of the world with all its darkness. In the face of the difficulties and darkness with which the world confronts us, we face a dual temptation: we can allow ourselves to be crushed by the challenges we face and give up; on the other hand, we may seek to distance ourselves from them. Whenever we turn away from the dark sides of world history and current events or from our own unacknowledged difficult sides, we divide the world into two parts. The first sentence of the Creed challenges us to overcome such divisions, when it affirms the unity of reality and our experience: the Ground of the World is spiritual-physical: there is only one source and destination for all that is.

Abstract thinking and prayer-thinking

Luke Barr

I have been thinking recently of a William Blake poem from the 'Songs of Experience'. It is 'The Human Abstract' and it's a sad song. It correlates to the song in 'Innocence', 'The Divine Image', where Blake sings the praises of 'Mercy, pity, peace and love', which Blake equates with God - and with the Human Being. When we pray, he says, we pray to these attributes which are the 'divine image' in human souls. What is prayer? Asking for something so deeply that the asking and the thing that we ask for, grows within us. It is an asking so existential, so profound, that we make something happen. Whether it is what we ask for or some truer thing is not ours to determine. We become the soil into which the spiritual seed that we ask for, can anchor its root.

This beautiful activity which humbles one in the right way, creates the right meeting space in the human soul for the divine and the human. Prayer can be the turning inward activity that we know. In some advanced individuals, it seems to infuse all that they do. Their everyday activities, whatever they are, are performed in such a way that makes them something like a prayer. They themselves become a prayer. It could be said that the entire activity of the man Jesus on Earth, everything he did was like a constant prayer. There is another form of prayer, and that is the sacrament. The sacrament is the archetype of prayer, of this meeting place between two worlds. We can also wonder how our lives might be if they were to be a constant sacrament, a constant prayer. What might such a world look like?

Without prayer or sacrament, we can create a world which seems to function. Indeed, for the most part, we have done just that. But really such a world functions almost like a mechanism, without any real heart. It is such a world that Blake addresses in the 'Experience' counterpart to his poem of 'The Divine Image', and this is the poem called, 'The Human Abstract'.

The line that has recently been whispering itself over and over again to me, is 'And mutual fear brings peace, until the selfish loves increase.' Blake is alluding to international relations - but also to that proclivity in the human individual's soul where fear dictates what we do. When fear reigns, and we run away from our fear, and lock ourselves away, what sort of peace does it bring? Is it real peace? Is this the peace of Christ? "My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, I give to you." (John 14:27) The world gives us a different peace, a pseudo-peace.

What is that third gift of those trinity of gifts at the altar, after the bread and wine? It is peace. What is

that peace? When it is there, it has nothing to do with fear. 'Perfect love casts out fear', John wrote in his letters (1 John 4:18). All these strange gifts from the altar, when they begin to manifest in our soul, they create a foundation for love. Not the 'selfish loves' that Blake speaks of, but the love which is the divine image in the soul.

The poem moves further through the realm of 'the human abstract'. What is this realm? It is a world being lead abstractly through abstract ideas of what is the best for everyone. Is it well meaning officials who congregate in a 'think tank' to find the best solutions? Is it a computer with virtual intelligence which, fed certain information, brilliantly calculates and provides abstract answers which affect real human lives? How abstract have we become, Blake asks. How real have we remained?

Blake was a recalcitrant. He had the courage to question whether the motivations we possess for doing the good were quite as well intentioned and pure as we claim. He spoke of a different spirit taking possession of us when we were not so clear about what we were doing (as individuals or as a society). It takes hold of us where, in the ground of the soul, there are 'selfish loves'. In this poem, he calls this spirit, 'Cruelty'. It 'sits down with holy fears, and waters the ground with its tears'. It makes a great show of lamenting human loss. Yet it does not feel it. And ultimately, it takes the human soul further into the world of the abstract, an abstract which becomes a Mystery full of dogmas, spreading over the thinking head of humanity, like some great science: "Soon spreads the dismal shade of Mystery over his (Cruelty's) head. And the caterpillar and the fly, feed on the Mystery."

The last two verses speak for themselves:

*And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the Raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.
The Gods of the earth and sea,
Sought thro' Nature to find this Tree
But their search was all in vain:
There grows one in the Human Brain*

This Cruelty has been born out of a human abstract idea, a humanity which has forgotten its divinity. The cruelty becomes a living organism within us, like a tree. Its fruit is deceit to others and foremost to oneself. How sweet the 'selfish love' of this fruit. Yet it lures Death, the black raven to make its home there.

Blake ends with a sweep of his hand. His voice is rare in poetry. He has the verve to take us in one grand leap from the simple, to the archetypal and heavenly: 'The Gods of the Earth and the Sea...' They wish to

pluck out this tree, but cannot, because it grows within 'their divine image', the free human beings. The abstract emanates from the human brain and not from the divine attributes within the human soul which Blake described with devotion in his poem, 'The Divine Image':

*For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.*

It is these qualities which can be cultivated in the soul. How would a culture look like that worked out of a true wellspring of prayer, or of sacramental 'willing devotion'? Would it not be 'thy Kingdom come'? How would our children fare brought up in such a culture, such a 'Kingdom'? How might we un-impede their life-tasks, if we could all cultivate prayer as an art - if we became less busy, less clever, less cynical, and instead want to become such artists in the same way Blake had to be, defiantly true to his calling, even though it meant poverty in his lifetime. Or the way the poet Rilke spoke of it, when advising a young poet: 'Only become a poet if you know that you would have to die, if you were denied the possibility to write.'

I am sure that when the gods or our angel accompany us to the threshold of the spiritual world and the earthly world before our birth, and ask us, 'Do you want to go to the earth again? To journey again through those wastelands? Do you want to learn once more what it means to be human, to be in a human body with all that that means? Do you want to strive to love? Do you wish to strive to manifest true freedom, and to fall again and again?', that they end by saying, 'Only take this journey to become human if you know you would have to die, if you were denied the possibility to strive every moment to become human...'

The 'poison tree' that Blake saw dwelling in a human thinking which was abstract, can be taken out, roots and all. But one must want to. A new tree can be planted there, a different living organism. Mercy, pity, peace and love, Blake calls it. I call it, sacramental life, when we 'take it into our thinking'. And it is planted with prayer.

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.