

In his poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake states; **'If the doors of (our) perception were cleansed everything would appear to (us) as it is, Infinite.'**

We continue to live in troubling times. The images of war fill our TV screens and create in us that sinking feeling of anxiety and fear. The temptation to turn the TV off and ignore the news. But we know we can't hide from the real world, and neither should we. As humans we are bound to it, and as Christians we cannot ignore the suffering of our fellow human beings. But it shakes us to our core nonetheless. So where are we to find our strength?

Well, we all know the answer; the answer is Jesus – God with us. But have we done enough to nurture the relationship so that it can endure when we really need it? Jesus offers the most important friendship we have. A friendship that will last beyond a life-time. A friendship that gives us life.

In the Old Testament book of Exodus, we are told of how Moses' face shone with holiness as he descended from the mountain after talking to God. It shone, because he was a person whose friendship with God had become so strong that he was able to enter God's presence. Being so close to God's holiness changed his appearance.

Some people work so hard at their relationship with God that those around them can physically see and feel it. They radiate God's energy. This happens because they have spent time attending to the divine friendship that exists in the centre of their souls. I wonder, can you think of anyone who seems to glow with this kind of holiness?

As my Lent book this year, I have been re-reading an excellent modern spiritual classic called: *Into the Silent Land*, by Martin Laird.

In it, Laird tells a story of a young man who has taken to getting a sharp knife and cutting himself. Why? Because deep inside there is a pain that

he cannot fathom nor overcome. 'As long as I can remember', the young man says, 'I have had this hurt inside. I can't get away from it, and sometimes I cut or burn myself so that the pain will appear in a different place.'

Interestingly, the young man who Martin Laird focusses upon eventually seeks the help of his prison chaplaincy and after just 4 weeks of meditating for 30 minutes morning, he notices a marked reduction in both the feeling of deep down hurt and the belief that self-harming could help ease it in some way.

Laird then goes on to quote another young person, who has gone through a similar experience. This perceptive young man says: "All beings, no matter how reactionary, fearful, dangerous or lost, can open themselves up to the sacred within and become free. I have become free even in prison. Prison has become my perfect monastery."

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In God we have a friendship based on truth, where we can be who we truly are. We can let God into our darkest places, knowing that he will understand and help us to mend. Though that feels risky to us, and often we clam up and put up the defensive barriers instead. But God is the only friend with whom we don't have to pretend. He knows and is with us in our joys and our sadnesses. He lives through our rejoicing and our pain. He is the friend who will not turn his back on us. God is the only friend who is with us at our beginning and our end. This is what prompts the anonymous author of the ancient spiritual classic, the Cloud of the Unknowing, to say, 'God is your being'. A sentiment St Paul coheres with when he says; in God 'we live and move and have our being.'<sup>1</sup> Or as the medieval Spanish monk and mystic, St John of the

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 17:28

Cross puts it, God is simply our 'centre'. God is our centre, our being, and only his love makes us whole.

This is the same God who meets Abram in the wilderness and speaks into his heart, saying: "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.'

Abram's descendants inherit all that God promises him, and despite their stubbornness, their hardness of heart and their constant turning away from God to instead attend to their own selfish ways, God does not leave them in the pit of their own making. He sends Jesus, his own son, so that they may see more clearly what friendship with God entails and looks like in the flesh.

What a blessing it is that Christ formed his church to continue what he started. That motley crew of apostles and disciples who, in spite of their own failings seem to almost stumble upon the truth that God is at our centre. They pass on the ways that reveal who God really is to future generations. By his grace, we are the latest chapter of that same body.

So remarkable and generous is God that St John the Apostle, in his first letter, runs out of words trying to adequately describe him. He settles with the simple yet profound statement that 'God is love'.

God is Love in its most indescribable sense. He is, at one and the same time, intimate love, merciful love, rebuking love, compassionate love, gentle love, challenging love, encouraging love. God's love can scare us and yet we know we cannot live without it. His love is as purifying as the fire and yet as cleansing as mountain dew.

What a blessing it is that he has called each of us to be his disciples, to inhabit and serve that same church, to build it up and walk in the precious footsteps of some of the holiest people that ever lived. How privileged we are to have been trusted with the mantle of passing on his Church's traditions so that every individual may come to know the

God at their centre. In our unity of devotion and community of holiness, we reveal aspects of the God who is infinitely mysterious and endless in his mercy.

But the world will not make things easy for us. We must expect there to be challenges. St Paul, in today's first reading, warns us that many live as 'enemies of the Cross of Christ'.

And in our Gospel reading today we hear of the lengths to which those enemies would go, 'some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'"

When the world begins to oppose us, ridicule us, threaten us, it can challenge our relationship with the God at our centre. Paul realises that 'the enemies of Christ' would try to shatter the sacred body of Christ's Church. This is why Paul pleads for us to: 'stand firm in the faith' and follow in the example that the apostles have set. This Lent is the perfect opportunity for us to strengthen our friendship with God through our prayer, fasting, and self-discipline.

We must remember that God is our centre.

**'If the doors of (*our*) perception were cleansed everything would appear to (*us*) as it is, Infinite.'..**

And we would see God at our core.

Amen.