Returning Home

In his prayer For Solitude, the late John O’Donohue prayed:

May you learn to see yourself
With the same delight.
Pride and expectation
With which God sees you in every moment.

Lent is a time to hold up the mirror. What do we see? Are we delighted, as O’Donohue prays, are we filled with pride and expectation because we know we are loved by God with delight and expectation? Probably not. Lent is a time offered to us to restore that vision, to restore that ‘delight, pride and expectation’ and like the prodigal child, to return home to where our heart lies. Today that really means to work to take steps to bring about a change of mind (how we see ourselves in relation to God) and heart (how we respond to God’s unconditional love). Why to take steps? Because it requires not only a conscious decision, but a plan, a regime if you like, to help us learn to see ourselves in such a light.

It’s not so easy today to become aware of how much we are loved by God ‘in every moment’. We fill our lives with so many things, not just things that keep us busy but things that we think will satisfy us, things that will make us successful, desirable, things that will make us happy. We settle for substitutes. So often those substitutes we have settled for have dulled our minds and hearts and given us the impression we are happy or satisfied, when we are really just finding a way of avoiding our longing for God. Deep down our heart is longing for God just as God is longing for us.

One word in Hebrew for what we call repentance or conversion is “teshuvah”. It means “returning home”. In other words, it means reconnecting with God, returning to God, going back to where we come from. The Catechism puts it this way:

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because each person is created by God and for God: and God never ceases to draw each person to himself. Only in God will each person find the truth and happiness that they never stop searching for (Catechism of the Catholic Church #27)

During Lent we are invited to reconnect with God who is ‘drawing us to himself’, to become attentive to that movement in our lives. That movement happens day by day, hour by hour, week by week. When we become attentive to God’s presence we will discover why our heart is never fully satisfied. It is missing God.

In many ways, the way we shape our hearts in this world will determine how we respond to God. That takes time. The substitutes can appear to be very appealing but, in the words of St Paul: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor is the human person even capable of imagining what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9)”. Nothing we know now can substitute for the love God has for us. It is, in many ways, beyond our comprehension – why does God love me so much? If we are to reconnect with God, if we are to be open to God’s drawing us to himself, we have to be able to ‘speak God’s language’ as it were, to give God a chance to communicate which is, as St Paul says, beyond our imagination. To do that we must give time to simply being alone, quiet and still before God. Learning to be still, both inwardly and outwardly, is a gift, a blessing. Inner silence isn’t always the lack of noise, it is when the inner self is at peace. This inner silence allows us to be alert and mindful of God who is already present in our lives.

Becoming alert or sensitive to God’s presence and God’s activity in our lives comes by stopping and being silent. That is what prayer is. It is allowing our heart to have a moment when it is alone with God, and our mind and our imagination are not calling us away because they are not so full of thoughts and desires and worries and dreams and fears. Just like developing any worthwhile skills, that takes persistence, practice, and commitment. Lent challenges us to make that commitment, to take that time on a regular basis. It doesn’t have to be long but it does need to be regular – at the start or end of each day, for example but whenever we choose, it will require that we break into our routine, to be still and come to know God.

I was in a school recently where each day, just before lunch, the students take time to give thanks – music plays for three or four minutes and in silence, students are alone with God, as it were. It is a very peaceful time. It is a time where hopefully lifelong habits are formed. Likewise, in another school, a teacher gathers her class just before dismissal on Friday afternoons. Around a lighted candle to symbolise the presence of God, students are asked to name a highlight of the week for which they wish to give thanks.

Taking time to be in God’s presence is made easier because, in the words of Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, God has come to us with a human face in Jesus. God is like Jesus. When we take time to think about His life, His dealings with people, His kindness and sympathy, His acceptance of people, His teachings about what God is like (the father of the Prodigal Son, The Good Samaritan, The Shepherd, Abba), our hearts cannot help but be moved. The journey to return home will simply be one of following our heart to where it really belongs.

Regards
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Along the track