

To those on Pilgrimage

On a pilgrimage an interesting thing happens. We leave behind our daily lives with all their cares and responsibilities, and we begin to form a little loving community. We share the stories of our lives and perhaps other things which we wouldn't ordinarily do. The new love seems more heartfelt and intimate than back home..Somehow we feel 'out of time', enhanced by the realisation that we may never meet again.

In this context we can also hear more deeply the call of Christ to be made saints, to be made like Christ - for this is what life is about and what pilgrimage is about. It is not easy to grasp that Christ truly is making saints in our time. He is doing that in many places we may know about, for example on Mt Athos, in Egypt, in Romania and Russia but also among those who are hidden from our sight, in monasteries yes, but also – and we must be very clear about this – among the married and those who live in the world.

Our sanctification does not consist in some inner extraction from life but is the sanctification of our very life, in the body, and of our bodies themselves. These are very deep Christian realities founded upon the Incarnation and Resurrection which it is so easy to shy away from. Sanctification is thorough and complete in its purpose: Christ takes over everything, body and soul, heart and mind in such a way they become his and not ours - in the sense that we no longer control them but Christ does. This is very *scary*, very scary indeed. Its reality shocks us to the core. It takes hold of our very being and transforms it to such an extent that the all-obsessive self dies in the act of losing all control.

Many people would deny this is possible. We have to state quite simply: it is not.

Nothing is more important on a pilgrimage to ask

Have you made yourself familiar with the one way of holiness in Christ?

Have you begun a thoroughgoing repentance
from the heart of all that resists God in you for Christ's sake?

Do you understand that only with such repentance
can Christ effectively cleanse our deep heart?

Are you able to locate yourself and your present life accurately in what the saints tell us of what needs to be done?

It's ok to be scared. St Paul was scared 'lest having preached to others he might be a castaway' (1 Cor 9.27) 'thrown out'. The most terrible words on earth are those which Christ said to those who claimed to know him: Get away from me. I do not know you.

I have been afraid. As a young man who had done very well at university and theological college I was afraid that the bishop might send me to the 'gin and jag' belt in his diocese to preach to the wealthy and clever. Meeting Fr Sophrony made it very clear to me that it was possible to be clever and lose ones soul, to have the appearance of religion but without its substabce – to speak of Jesus but to miss his ownership of my heart. I dreaded the thought. I could not bear to think that I could miss the real thing – the true sanctification of body and mind, of heart and soul and to be made like Christ. I was truly, truly, deeply afraid. I was haunted. And that is a good place to be, believe me.

St Paul said, 'Yes, and I count all things but loss for the sake of knowing Christ my Lord - for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but *dung*, that I may win Christ (Phil 3.8). 'Dung' he cries out, dung! These are the words of a man who has been brken by Christ and lies sobbing at his feet. But this too is a good place to be. The Psalmist says, @ broken and contrite heart O God You will not despise'

When I was at the monastery I began to realise that the scripture talks constantly about the heart, and responding to God from the heart. I realised that I did not know where my heart was, or what it was. So I made a little prayer which went something like this: O God, I do not know where my heart is or even what it is. But you know because you made it. I ask you to open it and enter into it that you may dwell there'.

Every day for three years I prayed that prayer. Christ came, true to his word and opened my heart. I cannot tell, for proprieties sake, what happened after that, but I can tell you beyond any doubt that in following Christ we are meant to experience the reality of Christ We are all given the gift of Christ in the sacraments, in baptism and communion but we have also to discover the *reality*. Get that – let it motivate you without fail and without hindrance until we have got that.

When Christ enters the depths of our hearts he shows us all our 'stuff' as never before. He shows us what the self gets up to inside us with shattering clarity. But it's ok. Christ will cleanse our heart and he will set us free.

I want to finish with 3 very brief practical points for you to consider.

First, regarding the world of 'things' we must be ready to abandon all attachment to them and dependance upon them.

Secondly, in place of the 'passions' which govern our heart Christ will bestow on us all those spiritual 'virtues' which the world is rapidly losing – humility, poverty of spirit, forgiveness, forbearance, simplicity, trust, faith, hope, patience, generosity of spirit, love and so on.

Finally, pray constantly for the descent of the Holy Spirit into your hearts. If you knew what the gift of quiet and stillness is in the Holy Spirit, you would never for one moment fail to pray for it.

May Christ bless you and the Spirit guide you