

## **Thoughts from the Journey**

*Antony Lester, O.Carm.*

It is certainly true that life is a journey with each step along the road having the capacity to touch and change us. Often we hear people say that "if only I'd known then what I know now..." The implication is that they may have lived their life differently or would, perhaps, have made different choices. The scriptures say "if you desire to serve God, prepare yourself for an ordeal"! How many of us would have made the life choices we have if we could have known what the future had in store for us? Hopefully, though, the picture is a positive one. The lessons of life can open us to a wider understanding of the providence of God. In this article I would simply like to share with you some thoughts from the journey in the hope that they may strike a chord with you or even find an echo in your own experience of God and God's ways. All these lessons have come to me through the people I have walked with at different stages on this journey and I have much to be grateful for.

### **We are God's works of art**

The first and most important lesson is in many ways a tough one to take hold of and it is that we are loved. The love that God has for us is unconditional, absolute and free. There is nothing that we can do which will make God love us more and nothing that will make God love us less. We literally don't have to do anything - it is pure gift. So much of people's religious experience seems to be about persuading God to love us as if God were some form of ogre waiting to pounce. The hard knocks of life become punishment for past mistakes rather than the touch of the artist's chisel at work to reveal the true beauty of our selves. St. Paul tells us that "we are God's works of art".

Hopefully we have all had the experience of truly being loved at some point in life. What enables me to know that I am loveable is that there are people who know the worst that there is to know about me and continue to love me. If frail fallible human beings can love in this way then how much more can God who is Love. To say that God is Love is to speak about the very identity of God. Loving isn't something God does when God is in a good mood or if we have got our sums right. Everything God does is moved by love and will bring about love if we will allow it. For those of you who are getting twitchy and muttering about the justice of God remember St. Thérèse: God is indeed just because God judges us according to who we are, according to our weakness.

### **Growing in all ways into Christ**

Another lesson is one that I seem to have to keep learning again and again and it has to do with how little we can know with certainty about God apart from the reality that God is Love. Certainly our desire to know God is put there by God but our need to pin God down is one that is doomed to failure. It's a little like watching a child trying to catch a butterfly believing that the butterfly is nature when all around nature is resplendent in beauty. Why then do we have this desire to know God if we keep finding out that what we thought we knew was at best only partially true? The truth is that God is always greater and the beauty is that we are made for God and can always know more. Growth is of the essence of what it means to be human; growth implies change. St. Paul speaks of us "growing in all ways into Christ".

It seems to me that God has more to do with the butterfly than with dogmatic statements. What an image if we allow that God is present in the whole action of butterfly chasing: the beauty of the butterfly, the excitement of the chase, the solidness of the earth, the rush of the grass as we pass, in the trees on the horizon, the warmth of the sun. How Carmelite an image!

In the Carmelite Liturgy the preface for St. John of the Cross teaches: "Through Christ, your eternal Word, you made all things, and you clothed them with his beauty and goodness". Ponder the "all things" for a moment. Nothing exists without the touch of God; nothing exists without something of the beauty and goodness of Christ. There is no person or place or created thing from which God is absent. Gerard Manley Hopkins breathes the same spirit when he tells us that "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." It is in this context of an all-encompassing presence of God that our tradition places us when it speaks of the Carmelite living in the presence of God.

### **Learning to love Jesus together**

I suppose that the next thought flows in some way from the last and it has to do with the whole business of religion. So often it seems that religion has become something that stifles life rather than celebrating it. It is as though God is busy shouting out "thou shalt not" when instead everything that surrounds us is God's YES. God believes in us and believes in the world. God has entrusted the building of the kingdom to us because God trusts us. Every new life born into the world is this YES of God renewed. St. John of the Cross describes the Church as "a school of love". Imagine that! Our parish communities as places where people learn what it means to love.

A strange thing for a friar to say maybe, but I have learnt to mistrust religion and tend to look instead for a sense of faith. It is amazing just how alive faith is amongst our people but so few of them seem to find an echo for their deepest and best dreams in the structures of religion. A case in point would be the whole ecumenical journey where so much is about who is right and maintaining structures of power and so little seems to be about learning to love Jesus together. So often the people abandoning our churches are not bad or selfish. Remember, nothing exists without the touch of God, nothing exists without something of the beauty and goodness of Christ. There is no person or place or created thing from which God is absent. God is well able to touch, heal and love the world outside the Church.

The Carmelite is called to recognise the presence of God and we must be open to that presence wherever it is to be found. Perhaps in being open to that presence in unexpected places we can grow more aware of just how much God is present in all aspects of our own lives - especially in our weakness and frailty.

### **Simply trust**

I think that most of us spend most of our time trying to feel our way through life a bit as if we were walking in the dark. There are a couple of ideas here that you might find helpful. The first is that darkness is normal and the inability to pray is normal. It's a bit like a safety mechanism that God gives to prevent us from getting too stuck on the journey. Our senses cannot cope with the reality of God and when we get a glimpse of God's presence we grab hold of it with all our might thinking that this is God. Because we are loved by God this warm sense of

presence needs to be removed else we will not move on with our search and so we find ourselves in the dark and we feel lost and abandoned, punished even. Remember that even the great Prophet Elijah, after his great victory on Mount Carmel "lay down under a furze bush and wished he were dead".

Some people run from method to method desperately searching for the "right" way of prayer. If you ask what this right way may be it turns out to be one which will produce the right effects, i.e. will allow me to feel that God is there or, to put it more bluntly, one that will give me the power to call up God's presence at my convenience! So much of prayer is being willing to wait in the darkness and silence simply trusting that the God who loves us is present and loving us. Often poetry can come to help us at least understand what is taking place. John of the Cross says if we really want to know what he is talking about then we should look to his poetry as the best expression of his thought. In his poem *The Absence* the great Welsh poet R. S. Thomas seems to capture something of this reality of prayer:

*It is this great absence  
that is like a presence, that compels  
me to address it without hope  
of a reply. It is a room I enter  
from which someone has just  
gone, the vestibule for the arrival  
of one who has not yet come.  
I modernise the anachronism  
of my language, but he is no more here  
than before. Genes and molecules  
have no more power to call  
him up than the incense of the Hebrews  
at their altars. My equations fail  
as my words do. What resources have I  
other than the emptiness without him of my whole  
being, a vacuum he may not abhor?*

People often think that when they are doubting and confused their faith is weak. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of faith as "... belief in things unseen". It seems to me that the people who never doubt and seem to have all the answers don't really need faith. Rightly or wrongly they can see where they are headed. It's the rest of us who are in the dark, whose prayers don't "work" and who aren't sure where we are headed who need faith. If you find that in spite of all this confusion you keep plugging away then whisper a prayer of thanks to God for the gift of faith!

### **Hope for the future**

Having spoken a little about love and faith I'd like to conclude with a final word about a much neglected virtue and that is the virtue of hope. Of all people Christians are called to be people of hope because of our belief that Jesus is victorious over all the things which prevent human flourishing, the things that we call sin, and ultimately even over death itself. Hope is not the reaction of the fool who wants to live in cloud cuckoo land pretending that all in the garden is rosy. It is, rather, the fruit of a faith rooted and grounded in the belief that we are God's good people living in God's good world and that we and our world are loved by God. It is from this that the belief that things don't have to be this way is born

and it is from this that the Christian response is to roll up our sleeves and get on with the business of building a world which is fit for all God's children to live in. So, just to finish off with I'd like to offer two quotations as possible food for your continuing journey both of which are rich in Christian hope. One is another poem by R. S. Thomas and the second is from one of the sermons of St. Augustine.

*Prayers like gravel flung at the sky's window,  
hoping to attract the loved one's attention.  
But without visible plaits to let down for the believer to climb up,  
to what purpose open that far casement?  
I would have refrained long since  
but that peering once through my locked fingers  
I thought that I detected the movement of a curtain.*

*(R. S. Thomas)*

*So brethren, now let us sing Alleluia, not in the enjoyment of heavenly rest, but to sweeten our toil. Sing as the travellers sing along the road: but keep on walking. Solace your toil by singing - do not yield to idleness. Sing but keep on walking. What do I mean by 'walking'? I mean, press on from good to better. The apostle says there are some who go from bad to worse. But if you press on, you keep on walking. Go forward then in virtue, in true faith and right conduct. Sing up - and keep on walking.*

*(St. Augustine)*