

Pentecost 17 1st October 2017
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The religious leaders asked Jesus what authority he had to be teaching in the Temple. That was the preserve of the senior religious men of the Temple. And yet, Jesus managed to turn their questioning around. Either answer they could give would put them in the wrong so they remained silent. Jesus had asked them where did John the Baptist's authority come from – from heaven or from the world. If they had answered 'from heaven' they knew Jesus would ask them 'so why didn't you believe him?' and if they said this world, then the crowd who were very pro John the Baptist would attack them. So silence was the only option. Not for long of course and their anger only added to the case against Jesus. In the end Jesus was crucified for taking on a role they didn't think he had any right to do. After all, who was Jesus? He did not come from a long line of Temple leaders. He was not highly educated. He was from a humble background.

A few years later, Paul was writing to the early church in Philippi, a small congregation of people who believed in the divinity of Jesus. Crucifixion did not stop all the followers of Jesus from holding true to his teaching and in fact, their numbers had grown.

In his letter, Paul included a hymn, probably repeating an existing hymn, to explain how Jesus had come from God and become fully human in order to serve God. Jesus was obedient to God even to the point of execution on the cross and because of that, God exalted him to be Christ the Lord. Thus, Paul says, all of us, all Christians, should worship Jesus or, as he puts it: "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend ... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord"

Those verses of Philippians chapter 2:6-11 are ones to read over and over. Think what it would have meant in first century Roman Empire. Those words challenged the worship of great leaders like the Emperor Augustus who was regarded as divine and then the Caesars who followed. That means that for the Philippians and for Christians following, political and royal leaders of countries did not stand on the same level as Jesus. Jesus was truly divine and Paul asks us all to be of the same mind as Jesus, not having selfish ambition or conceit but being humble.

Over the centuries, the numbers of Christians grew and grew and spread from country to country throughout the Mediterranean and then east, north, west and south. From time to time the church faced difficulties and numbers declined but at other times, there was a period of growth, often in a new geographic area. Ways of worshipping God have changed and today many congregations face closure but we still find churches serving the poor and needy in their communities and elsewhere. So we have hope that God will be with us throughout the ups and downs of the church and of our lives.

Having faith in God, trusting in God, is especially important during difficult times. There has been an especially bad flu season this year with a number of deaths. A volcano is threatening to erupt in Bali to our north. And over recent days, we have heard talk of imminent war between North Korea and the USA. Commentators are taking this very seriously. And we know that any war involving the USA also involves its allies including Australia. Yes, there has been talk from time to time throughout the year but each time the heat seems to increase.

How should we react to such national and international worries? How do we react to worries of a personal nature?

Recently, I've been reading about Julian of Norwich, a mystic living in Norwich, England, from 1342-1416. When she was 30 years old, she had a series of visions which she wrote down and later after much theological thought, elaborated on in her book *Revelations of Divine Love*. She became an anchoress, a religious person living in relative solitude, engaged in contemplation but available to give guidance to those who came to her window. We don't know her real name as she took the name Julian when she became an anchoress.

The times in which she lived were ones of turmoil and disaster. The Black Death killed as much as 60% of the English population and then recurred a few more times. Food production became an issue and yet land owners refused to increase wages so that inevitably, there was civil unrest. Other actions also contributed. You might have heard of Wat Tyler and the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. Feudalism started to break down. The Church was going through difficult times in the 14th century with the Popes stationed in Avignon, France for nearly 70 years and there was financial corruption in the church. Refugees came into England from the Low countries. The Hundred Years war between England and France continued throughout her life time. So - difficult times.

And yet, in her writings, she makes little mention of such disasters going on although she would have known. Instead she devotes herself to matters of the spirit. She followed the spiritual directions of Aelred of Rievaulx, a 12th century Cistercian monk and abbot. He taught compassion in prayer, so that in the end, the contemplative should draw near to the compassionate heart of God. It was with compassion that she heard the stories of those who came to her for guidance. In a way, the anchoress could be regarded as the medieval equivalent of a professional counselor.

Throughout all her years of contemplation, Julian found that the one message from God was of Love. Love was the meaning, love was the way it was given, love was the reason God revealed it to her. She believed that to come to know ourselves, we must first know God. At one point, Julian said that when people are full of pomp and pride and vainglory, the Lord will break that down and make them meek and mild, pure and holy through union with God. (refs from Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*, London SPCK 1987)

Contemplation on the will of God takes us away from worldly values. We can free ourselves from worrying about our status, our wealth and other such matters. Even matters such as war or disease are put into perspective with the will and love of God. The thing that matters most is the love of God. Knowing that love, we can face disasters and tragedies. Knowing the love of God we can understand better our own selves.

Whenever I read about leading Christian people, I find that they spend a great deal of time in prayer and meditation. For them there is no thought that they can solve the problems all by themselves but rely on God to be with them. They are humble just as Paul said we should be. Humility was one of the key virtues in St Benedict's Rule for life. There has been quite a bit written about Benedictine spirituality for modern lay living, making it available to each of us whether we are Catholic monastics or lay people in various denominations.

In her book, *The Monastery of the Heart*, author Joan Chittister talks of the 12 steps in the ladder which reaches to God and which Benedict called the 'steps to humility'. (chap 21) Chittister says that in Benedict's Rule the "cornerstone principle requires the acceptance of our earthiness, the embrace of our humanity as the very stuff of our holiness. ... "Humility is the antidote to the myth of perfectionism that eats away at the heart of the spiritual life" and humility is "an antidote to an achievement-driven, image-ridden, competitive society that is the hallmark of the modern age."

The sixth step of humility says we should be "content with the lowest and most menial treatment". We don't expect the best table in a restaurant, or the best house etc. Benedict's Rule says that "when we are satisfied with whatever we get, we can never be disappointed again".

And so as we work on humility, we learn to be comfortable with our lives as they are. Of course, that is easier said than done. There are always reminders around us of what others have or do. Are we jealous? Do we try to attain what seems fashionable or important in the world around? Or do we accept what God offers us? If we can learn to worship God, learn humility just as Jesus did, then whatever happens around us and to us does not affect our core being. God is at our core, our innermost selves.

So let me end by repeating Paul's hymn:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.