

Pentecost Sunday 2020

Would you like a revelation?

Thought you might ...so listen-up carefully.

There was once a man who was fed up with waiting for the end of lockdown, and who could see the nasty impact it was having on the economy, (so, no revelations there – that’s how most of us are feeling!) Our man decided to talk to God about it. “God,” he said, “How long, to you, is a million years?”

God answered, “In my frame of eternal reference, it’s barely about a minute.”

The man thought for a moment and then asked, “God, how much, to you, is a million pounds?”

God answered, “Well to me, possessing the wealth of the whole universe, it’s maybe just about a penny.”

With this, the man thought a moment longer. Finally, he asked, “God, please, can I have a penny?” (You can guess what’s coming ..)

God answered, “In a minute.”

God was more savvy and street-wise than the man in our foolish little anecdote had thought!

The man hadn’t expected *that* revelation!

Which reminds me: Have you heard about the electrician who became a priest?

He had a shocking revelation. (Aghhh! – groan)

On this Pentecost Sunday, I want to suggest that ‘moments of revelation’ are worth identifying and hanging onto and really rather cherishing.

Why? Well, our readings today are absolutely over-flowing with ‘moments of disclosure’ or ‘revelations’ for the first group of friends of Jesus. In our Gospel reading, John shows us Jesus *revealing* to them his continuing presence, after his Ascension, which will continue through the Spirit of God.

Well, that was pretty good! But, there was more. John tells us that Jesus breathed the Spirit of God upon *them*, and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven.’ That cuts right to the heart of what most of us need! So, Jesus’ ongoing presence is a forgiving presence, to assure people of God’s forgiveness. These revelations helped with their daily lives! – as they can with ours.

And there are still more revelations if we turn to Luke, the author of Acts. He writes about the wind and fire suddenly appearing in their midst on the day of Pentecost. And, you might say, their communications were dramatically transformed – spontaneous translation with no digital assistance— everybody, from all around the eastern end of the Mediterranean,

could understand the good news about Jesus' resurrection that they were jumping up and down with excitement about. These revelations were amazing and mind-blowing!

And revelations still happen. There's well attested evidence – from the Oxford Religious Experience Research Centre, that a very large number of people do experience moments of revelation or disclosure – but sometimes they shrug them off, and don't take them very seriously. Often, they ponder and wonder.

My suggestion is to take these revelatory moments seriously. There are disclosures of God's glory, love and forgiveness all around us. The amazing revelations of the day of Pentecost propelled those first friends of Jesus into understanding the Spirit of God, who had been breathed upon them, as a Spirit of continual disclosure and revelation. It's about 'seeing' - but 'seeing' with 'the inner eye of love'.

For example: follow on in Acts from Luke's account of the Pentecost events, and you find Peter and John meeting a *blind* man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. Notice that 'Seeing' or 'not seeing' is central:

"Seeing Peter and John about to go into the Temple, the blind man asked for money. And Peter directed his gaze at him, with John, and said: 'Look at us.' And he *fixed his attention* upon them." (Acts 3: 3-4)

And a little later the account goes on: 'And all the people *saw* him walking and praising God, and recognised him,' (Acts 3: 9)

The revelation, here, is that they are *seeing the truth* of who he really is, in God's eyes – that is, a person who matters to God.

So it is for us, for example, that the person in the hospital bed is primarily not a 'case'. She is a unique person who needs to be *seen*, even more than she needs to be cured.

Equally, the mass of children, who will soon converge again on our primary schools, are not just *pupils*; they need to be recognised and accepted as themselves individually, even more than they need to be 'filled with information' or taught the right questions to ask.

Perhaps the most poignant moment in Samuel Beckett's play, 'Waiting for Godot', is the second appearance of the boy to announce that Mr Godot won't be coming that evening. The boy asks one of the two tramps, Vladimir, what he should say to Godot, and Vladimir, desperately searching for words, replies: "Tell him ... tell him you *saw* me and that ... that you saw me. You're sure you saw me – you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!"

It is a cry from the heart that many would recognise these days, when more and more people are lonely, depressed and lost because they do not know with any certainty *who* they are, and *what* their purpose is in life.

Might it be – I wonder – that they can find their identity and their role only when someone else sees them with love?

This 'seeing with love' is one way of understanding what the Holy Spirit is about. You could say that it is the work of the Spirit of God to open my eyes in revelatory recognition of some other being, genuinely different from me, seen through God's eyes of love as eternally forgiven.

That – I reckon - is how all our lives make sense: it's not, as Descartes thought, 'Cogito ergo sum', (I think therefore I am), but, instead, 'Amor ergo sum' (I am loved, therefore I am). Descartes' sceptical rationalism didn't go deeply enough into what it is to be human! It's love, not thought, that defines us.

The Spirit of life and love is always at work in nature, in human living, and particularly wherever there is a flagging or corruption or self-destruction in God's handiwork, the Spirit is actively present to renew, energise and to re-create.

The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins takes us back to the Genesis image of the Spirit continuously active from the dawn of creation:

"And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." I love those images!

Creation includes forgiveness and healing. This is how God is, and so we can expect revelations, sudden recognitions, 'break throughs' or 'annunciations' to be part of our experience all the time. The Holy Spirit bubbles up with love and forgiveness.

Because of that, it is the Spirit who can arrange the incoherent mixed-up pieces of our reality until they fall into shape. The Spirit opens our eyes to see God at work in ourselves, and in others, in love and forgiveness.

Arthur Koestler's book, *'The Act of Creation'*, speaks about the vision of any original thinker or artist as a process of 'bisociation'. By this he means the ability to perceive, usually in a flash of intuition, some unsuspected link between two completely unrelated objects or ideas. He quotes several instances of breakthrough in scientific understanding being achieved in such an instantaneous 'disclosure' or 'revelatory moment'.

Last Sunday, I suggested starting praying with a focus point, maybe saying the Lord's Prayer; and these everyday fleeting moments of revelation or disclosure are excellent starting points for prayer – particularly if they lift your heart and leave you surprised by joy.

Praying spontaneously at the time, and also recollecting the moment later, is about deliberately prolonging, extending, savouring the expression of gratitude so that it doesn't drop away, unused and unexplored. To pray in a focused way that *gives thanks* is to enable

the Holy Spirit of God to make the most of our many revelatory moments of perception. As GK Chesterton wrote:

At the back of our brains, so to speak, there is a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The Holy Spirit beckons us *to dig for* this sunrise of wonder.

Let's pray:

Come Holy Spirit: Spirit of truth, touch our hearts with the joy and wonder of your coming.

Come Holy Spirit: Fill us with desire for your justice, forgiveness and peace.

Come Holy Spirit: Fire us with longing for you.

Send us out, in your power, to live and work to God's praise and glory. Amen.