

I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Well, we come to the end of another year. The Church's year really does end today. A new year begins tomorrow with the first Sunday of Advent, as we begin to look forward to the commemoration of Jesus' coming into our world as one of us. The Church's year is a reflection of our own lives, which are a constant series of endings and new beginnings, of deaths and rebirths, of continual change and growth. For the Christian, the centre of all of this change and renewal is Jesus, who stands as a figure of paradox, challenge and consolation at the same time. It is Jesus we've placed our trust in, Jesus we rely upon and Jesus who gives us the key to our existence and purpose. It is Jesus who calls us to give up everything and follow him, even at the cost of our lives.

The Anam Cara Community's year comes to an end here, too. We have journeyed together in large and small ways, through opportunities to meet together and encounter God in new ways. Some will have found that the old ways no longer fit, like clothes we've grown out of, and bid a fond farewell. Some will have become reacquainted with the old. We have continued to build this community, which has known both growth and loss. We have celebrated the new life that has developed through the ministry of one to another, as well as the new life that has come through tension and problems - as even problems present an opportunity in which God can work, and often chooses to work.

So we've *done* lots of things. Hopefully in our *doing* we've kept sight of the call of God to focus on *being*.

But why have we, as a community, done this? We are a community of prayer and support for the inner journey, in all of its many forms. That's a fine mission statement, as far as it goes. But let me ask you - why do *you* do this? Why are you on this journey? Take a moment to sit and ask yourself that question - why am I on this journey? Because we're not frightened of silence we'll allow a minute or two for you to ask yourself that question - because it is key to the reason for our very being.

St Augustine and I would probably not get along terribly well if we met. But one thing that we could agree on is his sentiment, which is expressed very well in the collect I asked Brian and Anne to include in today's liturgy:

Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you: pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I want to suggest to you that this is the reason we make the inner journey - because God has made us for union with him, and because until we rest in that union with God we are absolutely restless. That restlessness is the human condition, in many ways, and finds expression in many outlets. We all know people who are terribly good shoppers. They buy things to distract themselves from the restlessness they feel in their lives. Perhaps you're one of those. There are people who seek to assuage the restlessness in themselves with relationships, sport, drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, television, knowledge, the Internet, politics, property development, stock market speculation and religion (yes, even religion). Perhaps one of those is the way you seek to meet the ache in your heart - an ache only

God can fill. Don't misunderstand me - there are things in those lists that are good when used for good purpose.

As Christians we know in our heads that it is only God who can meet the emptiness in us - what we are sometimes not good at is letting this penetrate down to our guts. Because we still find ourselves running after a new kitchen, or a new house, a new Bible with a calfskin cover, the newest car, new clothes, new books. And do you know what - running after those things is a way that the world has of controlling us - turning us into good consumers and clients. It is only God who really meets us and gives us what we need. The reading from the Gospel is all about that. God does actually know what we need, and God provides it for us. As modern people we tend to want to read passages like that and interpret them symbolically. As Anglo-Saxon people, practical to the end and raised to ensure we've provided for ourselves, we are sickened at the thought of not knowing that we have enough money in the bank, enough superannuation, a reliable car and so on. The tension is, of course, that some of this is good and necessary stuff. But too much focus on it leads to us neglecting to trust in God, who meets us where we are and gives us what we need.

So, we embark on this journey because we're restless, because we often realise, gradually or suddenly, that the things of the world no longer have the allure they did, and we need more. God offers to meet our restlessness and we begin to walk on the path of the inner journey. I think this is a journey that, sooner or later, everyone makes, in their own way. I have a friend who is an experienced spiritual director and, really, a mystic. He tends to think that only a few are called to this path. I'm not sure about that - I think everyone walks along this path in some way.

But why the inner journey? Is it just for us? Just to turn us into holier people in union with God? I don't think so.

Your inner journey is not for you.

Your inner journey is a gift to God, a gift to the Church, and a gift to your neighbour. Because the inner journey leads us into deeper love for our neighbour, and if there is any truth to it at all, it leads to more love - more love for God, and more love for those around us. If on our walk we find ourselves becoming bitter, or closed, judgemental or superior, then we can be sure we are straying from the path.

Thomas Merton, one of the 20th century's greatest writers about the inner journey, wrote this close to his death:

My responsibility is to be in all reality a peacemaker in the world, an apostle, to bring people to truth, to make my whole life a true and effective witness to God's truth.

Merton really echoes and contracts the thoughts of Paul, which we heard in the reading from the letter to the church at Colossae. I think it bears re-reading:

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember,

the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.
(NLT)

Some things fall naturally from this tremendously beautiful reading. God chose us - it is God who makes the first move. We're called to be holy people, bound to him in love. The characteristics of being holy people are that we are tenderhearted, merciful, kind, humble, gentle, thankful and patient. We are forgiving because God forgives us, We accept that we're all broken, and all in need of one another's love. We are to live in harmony, and peace. The peace which comes from Jesus is to be the ruler of our hearts - it is this which is to govern our desires, responses and our interaction with others and the world.

What we notice about this reading is that in it Paul reminds us that all of this happens in community. Sometimes in our walking along the journey we feel that we're all alone. I've experienced that recently. I felt as though I was isolated, in a hole and estranged from all of those around me - even those who wished to be with me, love me, care for me and support me. While there is a truth in saying that we do make this journey alone, just with God, there is also a great truth in Paul's observation that we do this in community - teaching and counselling one another with the wisdom of God. Celebrating with one another, as we do today. Remembering that when we love and care for one another we do it as a representative, an icon, of Jesus. Jesus, who always points to God the Father.

The support of others in this journey is terribly important. Without it we run the risk of becoming cold, losing the way, spinning off on our own, or simply wandering in the wrong direction. So God calls us to be in community with one another, in our church, in the Anam Cara Community, with those God gives us as friends and encouragers on the way. Some will find the help of their parish priest, a spiritual director, soul friend or spiritual companion helpful - I know many who are here will be used to that. Such a guide can be a valuable way of ensuring that we stay on the path. And we should never forget that the process of being in such a relationship is often a two-way one. Paul, again, notes this - we're to teach and counsel each other with God's wisdom. Of course, that last point is very important too - God's wisdom. Much that runs around the world today wearing the clothes of spirituality or mysticism is not really God's wisdom, or if it is, it is dressed up in some unhelpful clothes. I would urge you to pray, talk to your wise friends, and investigate thoroughly before you become caught up in the newest and most vogue way of meditating, or the most cutting edge critique of traditional theology - some of this is vanity, well-meaning, but unhelpful. Some will help you on the journey, some will not.

So - we make this journey because we respond to God's original creation of us, as being made for relationship with him. We make this journey for love of God, for love of our neighbour. We make this journey authentically, knowing that some of what seems to meet the needs of our restless hearts actually captures them. We make this journey in community, to keep us balanced and to allow us to serve others.

Anam Cara Thanksgiving Eucharist, 28-11-2009
Reflection

As we come to Advent tomorrow I challenge you to rededicate yourself to the journey. Advent is a good time to do things like that, to make new beginnings, or to begin anew. Or simply to pull out the map and make sure you're going in the direction you think you are.

The Lord be with you!

Colin Thornby
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