

In John Henry Newman's poem, *The Dream of Gerontius*, as Gerontius' soul comes close to the throne of God his Guardian Angel says to him –



child, what thou dost ask; that sight of the Most Fair will gladden thee, but it will

John Bingham

Setting aside Anglican anxieties about the Roman Catholic view of purgatory which underpins much of the poem, we note that these lines echo the words that Mary hears from Simeon, that “this child – this Jesus - is destined for the falling and the rising of many... to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2 34-35)

Or as we may put it as we reflect on our Christian discipleship in the world: there is a cost. Following Jesus isn't easy.

Because of our baptism – and this surely is the heart of missionary discipleship – each of us is called to be a ‘Christ bearer.’ These words spoken by Simeon to Mary, apply to all of us. Although it is, of course, for those of us who are ordained, right and proper that we draw sensible and professional boundaries around the tasks of ministry, it is also true that if we wish to share the huge delights of serving Christ, then we must also be prepared to face the sorrows and the failures.

In the public square our words will often be misunderstood, misinterpreted and misquoted. People will think we're woke, naïve, misguided, too left wing, too right wing, too liberal or too conservative. We will be applauded for taking a moral stand, and pilloried for getting involved in politics. At the same time. On the same issue. But, knowing very well that we will sometimes get it wrong, what we are trying to be, is faithful to Jesus.

In personal witness we will sometimes meet scorn, apathy, even hostility. That which means most to us, will be considered trivial, laughable and neanderthal by some. But when we do share the gospel, we will find ourselves standing on the holy ground of other people's stories - and their pain - and often we won't have the words to say, such as when we're ministering to those whose lives are cut short, or taking the funeral of a child. Our hearts will be pierced, and like Mary standing at the foot of the cross, our witness will be a silent vigil and a determination to abide.

We will carry a towel, not a flag.

We will issue an invitation, not a summons.

We will, wherever possible, roll away stones.

In overseeing and resourcing the church for ministry, a responsibility that we all share, we will have to make painful and difficult decisions. In facing up to mistakes, we will be humbled, especially by our failings to safeguard the Church or to root out racism or even just to communicate well, and show kindness to each other, in these things, we will be pierced and broken.

Yet the sight of the Most High gladdens and sustains us. For me, that is around the table of the Lord and in the daily slog and diet of prayer and the comfort of scripture. And for all of us, laity, priests and bishops, the whole people of God, we must, as our first priority and the first call upon our lives, pay attention to those sources of replenishing grace that are given us in word and worship, in sacrament and fellowship, enabling us to persevere, to get better, to make amends, to love one another.

There is a wonderful scene in Peter Weir's film, Gallipoli, depicting events on the night before thousands of young Australian soldiers were sent over the top, facing almost certain death. The officer in charge at the front line, and who will himself have to lead the assault in the morning, sits in his office, not much more than a hollow carved out of the mud, and on a wind- up gramophone he listens to a piece of music. Nothing is said.

The camera lingers on his face. We see him listening intently to the music. We are invited to read his thoughts. For a few moments we get inside what it must be like, not just to be involved in that sort of situation, but to lead others through it.

It's years since I've seen the film, and I can't remember what the music was – I guess it was a piece of opera - but in my mind I see him sitting there, contemplating the music, weighing up what lies ahead of him, connecting himself with something beautiful that was beyond and away from the horrors of war.

I suppose you could see this as escapism, as a way of avoiding reality, but I saw it differently. Here is a man charged with terrible responsibility, following orders, but at the same time having to deliver costly orders to others. He sees the madness of it; he feels and holds the pain of it; is trapped and constrained by the choices that others have made; knows what he must do, but still looks beyond it. Amid the frightful inhumanity and degradation of trench warfare he connects himself to a beauty that must have seemed unreachable and yet, at the same time, is one of the few things worth seeking. In those few moments of contemplation, he is able to compose himself and discover within himself the resources he needs to lead others.

What we see is not the leadership itself, but someone discovering resources to lead others by retreating to a place of stillness and contemplation.

In the midst of horror, he stops. And in stopping is better able to carry out his responsibilities, drawing on resources outside himself.

Writing to the saintly Bishop Edward King in 1861, his predecessor as Principal of Cuddesdon, H.H. Swinny wrote this on the importance of meditation –

'We all try to do too much and don't give enough time to earnest quiet thought... Somehow even my prayer, and Divine Service within God's congregation, lose much of their reality without this deliberate bringing of the Unseen into sight, and basking in the light and warmth of it for a little season. We shall accomplish more by attempting less.'

And Edward King himself persistently maintained that our first priority must be to 'secure our own individual reunion with God through Christ, nurtured in those times apart, in solitude and silence.'

'Oh, blessed are the poor in spirit', says Jesus, 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 5.3)

At the heart of what it means for us to be a Christ centred Church is this renewal of prayer and spirituality, the disciplines of contemplation, the pursuit of holiness, the recognition that we don't have all the answers, a poverty of Spirit which is a richness in our need of God's mercy and redemption, the 'deliberate bringing of the Unseen into sight', that even a so-called vision and strategy is simply a call - a call to God, a call from God, to centre our lives in Christ and then a few questions that we think are worth addressing and around which we will order our priorities.

So how can we grow younger and more diverse? (And I'm so glad that at this Synod we will at last have time to share our insights and ideas on this.)

And how can we create new pathways of belonging for those who don't yet know Christ, revitalising the parishes and chaplaincies of our Church and expanding our vision to create new communities of faith and see more people come to faith in Christ?

And how can we learn to be disciples of Jesus ourselves?

Gladden your hearts with the sight of the Most Fair. Be constantly renewed and resourced by the beauty of Christ, the beauty of worship, the beauty of scripture. One thing I ask of the Lord. This I seek. To live – to find my life - in the house of the Lord... to behold God's fair beauty (see Psalm 27. 4).

So this is what I say to myself each day: Stephen, know your need of God; know that you need resources outside yourself; don't believe your own publicity; own up to your mistakes; don't think you're in charge or this is your church. It isn't. And seek out those places of prayerful contemplation and replenishing where you will know God's love for you and accept that a sword will pierce your heart too. And – in this week of all weeks – don't we need this sort of leadership in our nation as well as our church.

Recently - it was a bad day - I found myself doing a similar thing to that army officer in the film. Stuff was mounting up. People were asking me for things that I couldn't give them. Difficult and painful decisions had to be made. And I wanted someone else to make them. I didn't feel equal to the task. I didn't really want to be the Archbishop of York that day. I just wanted to be Stephen.

I was on my way to a meeting, so before getting in the car I sorted out some music to listen to. I often do this, but on this day I needed something to lift my spirits and take me somewhere else, where I might catch a glimpse of the Most High God.

So, I reached for Elgar's setting of The Dream of Gerontius. And listening to the music I re-connected with a beauty that is available to all of us, that is the deepest truth and a very echo of the life of God: and in this beautiful music also an affirmation of the Christian faith itself.

I listened to Act 1 driving to the meeting, and Act 2 on the way back. Only Act 2 is slightly longer, so on a layby on the way home I pulled in. My electric car didn't need recharging. But I did. And I listened to the final song of the angel singing to the saved soul,

“Softly and gently, dearly ransomed soul,
In my most loving arms I now enfold thee
And o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee.”

Dear General Synod. Welcome back to York. May we find here a place of peace and restoration, and simply this - as we do our business, let us keep remembering it is the business of God. There is a cost, but around us and beneath us and holding us always are the everlasting arms of an ever-loving God. It is this God made known in Jesus Christ we serve, to God that we give account, and to God we bend the knee. Amen

More information:

- The Address was delivered by the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, at the opening of the July 2022 sessions of General Synod, in York.
 - [Information about General Synod July 2022](#)
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