

Reflections for Holy Week by Canon John Simpson

The Fear of Answered Prayer

I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see. My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me. Isaiah 21:4!

Be careful what you pray for! I should have known. I preached at Breinton at the beginning of Lent quoting the poem :

Slow me down Lord.

Ease the pounding of my heart

By the quieting of my mind.

Steady my hurried pace

With a vision of the eternal march of time.

Give me, amid the confusion of the day,

The calmness of the everlasting hills.

Break the tension of my nerves and muscles

With the soothing music of the singing streams

That live in my memory.

Help me to know the magical restoring power of sleep.

Teach me the art of taking minute vacations,

Of slowing down to look at a flower,

To chat with a friend

To pat a dog

To read a few lines of a good book.

Slow me down Lord

And inspire me to send my roots

Deep into the soil of life's enduring values

That I may grow towards the stars of my greater destiny.

Those lines were written by Wilfred A Peterson, who, inappropriately, lived in Rapid Springs, California!

I said that retirement meant slowing down; and Lent ought to mean a slowing down, "Lente" in music means just that.

But my prayer seems to have been answered; not only have I slowed down; it seems almost to be full stop, for *now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in to saucy doubts and fears*. So, I say, be careful what you pray for!

We speak sometimes of "unanswered prayer", but I don't believe that any prayer is ever unanswered; the answer may not be what we desired. Much more difficult is the pain of answered prayer...

Listen to the prophet: *My heart falters, fear makes me tremble, the twilight I longed for has become a horror in me (Isaiah 21:4)* It seems that the prophet had asked God for insight and vision in the political unrest and fear of his day, so that he could peer into the unknown future and he could speak to the people the true prophetic word of God. His prayer was answered. The darkness was lifted and he saw, and what he saw terrified him. He may have regretted that prayer. If one prays for light, one must also be prepared for the light which can blister and burn. But that's to begin another sermon.

So to Holy Week. I have walked along the pilgrim way, The Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem a number of times. Today I walk it in imagination:

Monday. Jesus cleanses the Temple; he turns out the dove sellers and money changers. I expect they set up their stalls elsewhere; the Temple was God's house, not

the place for racketeering and for robbing people. *“My house shall be called a house of prayer”*

And we now have been turned out of our Houses of Prayer: our cathedrals, churches, chapels, mosques, synagogues, meeting places have been closed to us. We have been encouraged to seek alternatives ways of worshipping, praying and having communion with each other. And how rich are the resources which are being shared on the various forms of media. In our own group of churches, pastoral care is being offered via the internet and text messages on mobile phones speak of shared concerns, for example. I must say I have not really come to terms with these ways of communicating, and rely a lot on the land line telephone. So I have telephoned friends from past days, for a chat. Whatever; without the physical presence of being in church, we are experiencing Christian love and friendship.

I have prayed for some time for a fresh vision of what the Church might be. Where are we going? What could we be doing? How can we change? How may we be more relevant? Show us Lord. And that prayer has to some extent been answered. Are we content with the answer? *The twilight I longed for...*

Tuesday A day of questions. St Mark's Gospel shows us Jesus replying to questions about his authority (Mark 11:27ff) About paying taxes (Mark 12:13ff) About marriage at the Resurrection (Mark 12:19ff) About the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29ff) They did not all get the answers they wanted. In fact some questions were not answered at all. My friend, now deceased, wrote a book many years ago called *“Questions Jesus Would Not Answer.”* He pointed out that the *“answer”* to the question about paying taxes was not really an answer at all. Our Lord's method was often to return the question giving the questioner resources to work out the answers for themselves. *“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* A rich ruler's question (Luke 18:18) He obtained his answer : *“Sell everything you have... give to the poor... follow me.”* He became sad... he went away because he was a man of great wealth. Exactly. *The twilight I longed for...*

We used to sing in Sunday School:

Christ is the answer to your every need.....

In so many ways that is most wonderfully true. But I have discovered many questions which just do not have ready answers. My discipleship with Christ has enabled me to pick up clues, but now I know in part. One day we shall fully understand. Don't ask why this Coronavirus pandemic, why does God allow it, why do the innocent suffer....? The questions are being returned to me. What am I discovering? What is this teaching me? What is this self-isolation doing for me?

Wednesday. Also known as Spy Wednesday or Good Wednesday. Jesus is in the house of Simon the Leper (Mark 14: 1 - 12). A woman anoints his feet. The disciples argue the toss about whether or not this is wise use of money. The expensive phial of ointment seemingly wasted could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Judas leaves and arranges to *“sell”* Jesus for 30 pieces of silver (You would not sell a dog you loved for that) It's about money I'm afraid.

If we pray that God will guide us into a Christian use of all that he has given us - and that includes his creation, I wonder if I am prepared for the answer I may receive? *The twilight I longed for..*

Yes, pray for the light, but remember that the light may reveal more than you wish.