

Fr Andy writes...

COMING BACK TO CHURCH

COMING BACK TO NATURE

I was pleasantly surprised with the celebration of Mass at St Joseph's and St Mary Magdalene's churches last weekend. My fears that a community which is not allowed to stand close, to sing and worship together, to offer each other a sign of peace and to chat and share a cuppa with one another, did not materialise. In fact the whole experience was quite prayerful. Despite the necessity of observing social distancing measures, the use of sanitisers, and a number of people wearing masks, especially, the stewards and the Eucharistic ministers, it felt that we are on the road to the discovering what it means to be a community again. It was a necessary step in the right direction and the people present seem to recognise that we can value once more a sense of what it means to be a community at prayer. The Eucharist was shared and we were all nourished with the abiding presence of Christ. It certainly made me hungry for more. I pray that the cluster of parishioners who came to celebrate Mass on Saturday at 5.00pm and on Sunday at 11.00am may spread the word and gently encourage others to move towards, albeit slowly, to more celebrations in church.

During this time of lockdown I have been less pressured to "do" and had more time to "be". I have had time to learn, to read, to self-educate and prepare for the time ahead, and above all, I have had time to meditate in the void of this darkness, brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. In my daily walks I have discovered so much about Nature. I walk in Nature, not as an escape from the strain and stress of urban life, nor for sightseeing, nor simply to "stretch my legs" and get some fresh air. I go into Nature as a pilgrim for the renewal of my spirit. Walking in Nature has become my meditation, my prayer. The magnificent trees and majestic meadows are my temples and cathedrals, and I don't look above the sky to seek heaven; my heaven is here on Earth. Nature does not belong to humans, humans belong to Nature; humans are Nature – there is no distinction. I found that I am nourished just as much with Nature as I am with the Eucharist – there is no distinction. Perhaps that's why many parables of Jesus were taken from Nature, so he could feed them his Word. "Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are? Look at the flowers of the field; they never have to work or spin; yet, I assure you that not even Solomon in all his regalia was robed like one of these flowers."(Matt 6:26)

Jesus does not tell us to study the birds or the flowers, he does not tell us to name them and write a thesis about them, or even think about them, but simply look. In other words be one with what you are looking at in all its beauty. Do not let the mind jump in with all its answers and opinions and comments. When we look in awe at Nature we become one with it – we are spiritually fed.

We are gifted with the wonders of change, with the gentleness of the breeze and the strength of the storm. We can hear the singing of the birds and the scuttling of little animals – and it's all free. We only have to look and listen. The book of Genesis tells us that after God's creation of six days he LOOKED at everything and saw that it was good. He seemed to be full of joy because His creation was sufficient to sustain all kinds of life. He loved the Universe and found there was nothing lacking. Then he handed it all over to human beings to till it and care for it. He wanted His delightful world to be always beautiful and life-giving. It was never His intention that his precious Universe to be destroyed by war, greed, exploitation, destruction or abuse. Human beings were given free will and the responsibility to make this world a better place. If we draw insight from our own ancient beliefs and draw inspiration from our spiritual heritage, and if we reflect on our Celtic imagination, we see that for the Celts being in the contemplative presence of Nature was being in the presence of the Divine. Time spent in contemplation was time well spent.

Though these days we generally live in times of constant activity and excitement, stressed out by the sheer effort of being alive and trying to do things with speed and efficiency, the coronavirus has caused us to put the brakes on our power driven struggle and has given us a breathing space to “be” – as we are meant to be. In his beautiful book, “Eternal Echoes”, John O’Donoghue tells us the “Ideally a human life should be a constant pilgrimage of discovery.” Discovery enlarges our sensibility and Nature opens itself up to us and offers us untold mysteries. Let us not lose sight of these offerings. Can we be silent enough to hear Mother Nature whispering to us? She is constantly renewing herself and she will never disappoint us.

On a personal note I am certainly not disappointed with the transformation of my own back garden. Chris and Roy Parrott have done an amazing job turning a pretty much rough and ready wild garden into an oasis of peace and tranquillity. I am very grateful to them for this lovely act of kindness. As I write this reflection it happens to be the lovely feast of Mary Magdalene (22nd July), the patron of our sister parish in Maltby. The gospel reading today takes place in the Easter Garden. Mary goes looking for Jesus because his body has been removed from the nearby tomb. She turns and sees Jesus, though she did not recognise him. He said to her “Woman, why are you weeping?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him.” Jesus said, “Mary!” She knew him then and said in Hebrew “Rabbuni” which means Master. Notice that Jesus does not tell Mary to stop crying, but simply asks her why she is crying. He does not try and provide her with explanations and reasons, but gives her space to “be”. In speaking her name she recognised him. We too can bring our worries, our isolation, our fears and our sense of loss into the garden of Nature and if we can listen deeply in the peacefulness that surrounds us, maybe we too will hear the voice of the Lord Jesus, speaking our name and then we will recognise the presence of God in Nature.

PS The Pope met with his Cardinals to discuss a proposal from Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Israel. "Your Holiness", said one of his Cardinals, Mr. Netanyahu wants to challenge you to a game of golf to show the friendship and ecumenical spirit shared by the Jewish and Catholic faiths."

The Pope thought this was a good idea, but he had never held a golf club in his hand. "Don't we have a Cardinal to represent me?" he asked.

"None that plays very well," a Cardinal replied. "But," he added, "there is a man named Jack Nicklaus, an American golfer who is a devout Catholic. We can offer to make him a Cardinal, then ask him to play Mr. Netanyahu as your personal representative. In addition, to showing our spirit of cooperation, we'll also win the match."

Everyone agreed it was a good idea. The call was made. Of course, Nicklaus was honoured and agreed to play. The day after the match, Nicklaus reported to the Vatican to inform the Pope of the result. "I have some good news and some bad news, your Holiness, " said the golfer.

"Tell me the good news first, Cardinal Nicklaus," said the Pope.

"Well, your Holiness, I don't like to brag, but even though I've played some pretty terrific rounds of golf in my life, this was the best I have ever played, by far. I must have been inspired from above. My drives were long and true, my irons were accurate and purposeful, and my putting was perfect. With all due respect, my play was truly miraculous.

"There's bad news?", the Pope asked.

"Yes," Nicklaus sighed. "I lost to Rabbi Tiger Woods by seven strokes."