



Br Stuart for the Baptism of Christ (2021)

COVID-19: another lockdown!

“Lift up your hearts. – Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. -- It is indeed right, it is our duty and our joy at all times and in all places to give you thanks and praise.” --- ???

The Prime Minister calls Covid-19 ‘the enemy’ and says we must beat it, but before we do, could this new lockdown be offering us time to ask what the pandemic might have to teach us and for which we might actually want to give thanks and praise?

Covid-19: Minister of the Gospel ????? Might the pandemic be calling us back to Gospel values?

Over the last few months I have been pondering something Chris Liley sent me: “Nothing is lost in the economy of God”. In vain I have tried to marshal my thoughts into a cohesive response and this homily is neither cohesive nor exhaustive, but the beginning of this morning’s first reading suggested a starting point.

“God created the heavens and the earth.” We now know that many of the stars are galaxies of millions of planets and more are still being created – presumably by the same Creator – which both challenges us to ask how big is our concept of God and also to take a look at the creation around us and our relationship to it.

How real is our take on creation? Western society has tended to sanitize and romanticise it and forget that it is ‘red in tooth and claw’ – to have domesticated both Creator and creation to such an extent that we assume human beings can control both – which is nonsense when you stop to think about it, but how often do we stop and think about it?

Suddenly we are being faced with the reality of climate change, the finitude of the earth’s resources and humanity’s abuse of the planet. We are becoming aware of the appalling scale and effects of plastic pollution, the sickening effects of obesity and over-indulgence, the unrealistic expectation of a healthy, pain-free, comfortable life, the denial of our mortality and the shocking discrepancy between the rich and the poor – the incomprehension of the ‘haves’ of the reality of life for the ‘have nots’and then along comes Covid-19, the great leveller, no respecter of persons.

Life is disrupted. Mr Trump blames China. Britain blames Boris and grumbles at the lockdown restrictions. Do we forget to ‘give thanks at all times and in all places’ because we don’t remember that God may well be able to use the pandemic to save humanity from destroying both ourselves and the planet?

“Nothing is lost in the economy of God!”

Many people – including many who would normally say they don’t believe in God – are asking, ‘How could a loving God create such a virus and cause such suffering?’ One might equally ask how an

affluent, so-called civilized society could so abuse the planet or be so blind to the abject poverty of so many despite the pictures that flick across TV screens and the News reports?

It's not a case of blaming China or Boris – or God. Nature IS red in tooth and claw, and viruses are viruses, and we, like Covid-19 are an intrinsic part of nature. Perhaps we are being invited to get real about who we are...

...because it is into this 'reality' that the real God comes – the REAL GOD, not some pious human projection – and speaks the Gospel, offers a fresh understanding and vision, a fresh way of being in the world and in society.

“Take off your shoes; you are standing on holy ground.”

“Be still, and know that I am God” – not you! And yet.... Because “I AM”, you ARE – we ARE, caught up in the Divine Mystery. Which is why what Br Philip was proposing on Monday is so important: the need to take time to sit still in our cell, in the Oratory – anywhere where we can be quiet and still - and “know”, and in the light of that ‘knowing’ become aware of what God might be trying to teach us through this pandemic.

A handful of suggestions:

Perhaps, first of all, we might remember something St Benedict had realised 1,500 years ago: the vital importance of growing in humility. Chapter 7 on ‘Humility’ is the longest chapter in the Rule: humility in front of the Divine Mystery, in front of Creation, in front of each other. So easy to forget! Much more of a Mystery than many of our wordy liturgies and hymns might suggest, but a Mystery we are created to be in relationship with.

This leads on to a second lesson we might be being invited to ponder and respond to: we are all part of Creation and interdependent. The health of our planet requires us to respect rather than abuse it, and to respect rather than abuse or simply ignore our neighbours – wherever they live.

One of the greatest lessons the virus is teaching us is that it isn't much use the rich countries grabbing all the vaccines; Covid-19 doesn't respect national boundaries, and as long as it is rife in the poor countries, the rich ones won't be safe and they are going to have to help pay for the vaccination of many of the poorest peoples. ? could/should/might this lead to an increase rather than decrease in aid to the poorer countries and the relief of national debts?

The pandemic has highlighted in a way difficult to ignore the vital importance of many traditionally low-paid jobs, and the courage, commitment and generosity of those who work in them. The penny seems to be dropping that it is not enough simply to ‘clap for carers’, but that they need to be respected, valued and honoured AND PAID APPROPRIATELY. Might that lead to a whole new understanding of the sacredness of all people?

In the Government's last Election Manifesto there was an acknowledgement of the great North-South divide and a commitment made to a ‘levelling up’. The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare some of the reality of the discrepancies between North and South as the economic effects of the lockdowns [not to mention BREXIT] are felt. Had it not been for the virus, it is possible the ‘levelling up’ agenda might have quietly slipped and the folk in the South might well not have noticed as they/we got on re-building into whatever the ‘new normal’ might be.

And then there is the ‘big one’: Covid-19 is forcing us to face the reality of our mortality, and for many this is something new, and it has made many people genuinely anxious and frightened. Another long lockdown faces many people with the terrifying prospect of having to confront the deepest questions of life and death, and they feel they have no-one to turn to for help.

Nowadays the last place many would look for help is the Church, but some do. How many are disappointed with what they find? Perhaps one of the gifts of Covid-19 is a WAKE-UP call to the Churches – of all denominations and stripes.

Today we are celebrating the Baptism of Christ, but we need to open our eyes to the fact that if our celebration is to be authentic it must be more than words. We are being invited to respond by accepting more intentionally that we, too, have been baptized into Christ, into the Christ-life – into the on-going ministry of Christ. Christians are being challenged to bite the bullet: there is one Christ, and a divided Church is not only a scandal and a stumbling-block but a heresy. This brings it nearer to home: our Community was founded to pray for the unity of the Church. How are we doing that?

Jesus’ prayer was: “Father, may they all be one THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE”. The Gospel message we are to proclaim is of God’s love and care for all people – not just the religious few. God is the ground of every human being: Creator of the Universe yet closer to each of us than the air we breathe. Covid-19 is reminding us that the Church has a ministry to all humanity and could be requiring us as monastics to take a fresh, radical, look at what God may now be asking of the Monastic Tradition and how we interpret it in the new social reality resulting from the pandemic.

“Nothing is lost in the economy of God” – let’s take courage and continue to explore the Mystery of God-love...and GIVE THANKS !!!