

Sunday 20 April 2008: Fifth Sunday of Easter

The small boy and the elephant

Readings: Acts 7: 55-end; John 14: 1-14

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

As we come to the altar rail week by week to receive the sacrament, we probably don't give much thought to the bread that we receive in our hands. Where it comes from; who makes it. The vergers order it, making sure we don't run short, and it arrives in sealed plastic bags ready to be put into the ciboria and brought up during the offertory hymn.

In my last parish there was a Sainsbury's at the top of the town. It was the sort of parish where it was impossible to go in there without meeting several people you knew and quite often I would see a rather rotund figure in a monks habit pushing a laden trolley. It was Giles, the Abbot of Alton Abbey, a Benedictine community set in the countryside but within our parish boundaries. There were few things that Giles enjoyed better than a trip to the supermarket to shop for the community – often accompanied by William, the Prior. He would confess that shopping was one of his recreations.

There were some wonderfully engaging characters at the Abbey and they always made me very welcome, often sending me away with a jar of their terrific home-made jam. There are commercial suppliers of what are called, in the jargon, altar breads, but a number of convents and monasteries also produce them as one means of keeping themselves going. It feels right to support them in this and I also like the thought that our wafers come from a bit of a holy source as it were. When the convent, in Yorkshire, that used to supply us stopped making wafers in the size we need the Abbey was able to step in, so our wafers come from the kitchens of a rather beautiful monastery in the woods of Hampshire.

I was reminded of this by an interview that Abbot Giles gave recently. After confessing to his love of shopping he made a rather startling statement about his community when he said 'We don't pray.' He then went on 'I prefer to say that God prays in us. We need to allow him to be in us. So many of us haven't learned to live with ourselves, in silence, for fear we might hear Him say something we don't want to hear. We drown out anything that might be going on inside. It's like giving God earache.'

God prays in us. And Jesus said 'The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.'

So often we see prayer as a time, really, of hard work, of something that is dependent on us for the doing. Something that's cerebral and a bit of a struggle, as if it's about finding a way of pulling ourselves up to God and that he's simply there for us to struggle towards and we never quite seem to get there. We may think of traditional religious communities whose members get up in the middle of the night to pray on cold, hard floors. And then Abbot Giles says 'We don't pray. God prays in us.'

So really prayer isn't all that much about our own effort. That idea sits more comfortably with traditions that don't have a personal God. But Christianity is about a personal encounter and it depends almost entirely on God's grace and not on our will. We can't force this any more than we can force any other sort of relationship. But we can be open to it, though that can feel just as hard to us, though in a different way, especially if we fear the silence.

The priest/poet who led my ordination retreat told us a story. He was doing some parish visiting and it was a very hot Summer's day. He went to see an elderly parishioner. He enjoyed visiting but the heat was oppressive, he was tired and so was she. It was a very sleepy sort of day. She said she'd rather doze off than do a lot of talking and he said he'd rather like that too. So, for half an hour, they nodded off in their chairs and then the visit ended.

He acknowledged that this was somewhat risky advice about pastoral visiting to be giving new priests but the point he wanted to draw out was that holiness and prayer isn't always about speaking. God can pray in and through us even while we sleep – wise words from a nun to an exhausted retreatant.

When Paul writes 'pray always' the prayer he is thinking of isn't so much something that is done, an activity, but an acknowledgement of something God does in us, allowing us to be ourselves before Him.

Thomas Merton was attracted to silence throughout his life. As a young monk he thrived on the silence of the woods around the monastery. 'This afternoon,' he wrote, 'I was content looking at the low green rampart of woods that divides us from the rest of the universe and listening to the deep silence, content not for the sake of the scene or the silence but because of God.'

Merton drew a distinction between outer and inner silence. He thought of outer silence as the absence of sound, the quiet time he needed to read, to meditate, to study or just not to be talking. He realised the need for external silence in a world much given to noise. But his quest for silence led beyond just an absence of sound. Outward silence opens the door to inner silence, and inner silence is the silence of our real selves before God. In its deepest form this inner silence dispenses with the need for thoughts or words and we are just present, attending to God.

We're not all made for this type of prayer but it remains true that the business of prayer is largely God's work in us (though that doesn't free us from all responsibility as we remember that this is a relationship!). God is in us and only He can initiate the encounter.

I remember a doctor I knew telling me once that a good part of his time was spent in reassuring people that there was nothing wrong with them and then sometimes he would wake up at night remembering some patient and worried that he'd missed something serious. There are moments in our lives – events, conversations, relationships – when, if we don't respond we could lose something precious. Usually I think, these moments or events are the ones that just happen or perhaps were even forced on us rather than the things we plan. The Gospels are full of such moments. Think of Simon of Syrene being forced to carry the cross of Jesus. I think we can be pretty sure that wasn't how he thought his day would turn out when he got up.

It's often our natural instinct to assume where we'll find God. There's a story about a man who went to a Guru and asked him how he could become holy. The Guru told him to practise seeing God in all things. He went on his way through a narrow forest path and met an elephant. The

small boy riding the elephant shouted to him to get out of the way but the man reasoned like this. 'God is in the elephant. God is in me. God cannot hurt God. Therefore I will just continue.' And so he did, in spite of the warnings of the small boy. When the elephant got close he took the man up in his trunk and flung him into the forest, out of the way. The man went back to the Guru full of complaints. He said that he had tried to follow the Guru's instructions and this was the result. 'But you didn't follow my instructions,' said the Guru, 'God was also in the small boy.'

We miss the presence of God so easily and then we try to initiate prayer but, if Giles has got it right, then we don't but God prays in us and our task is to practise listening and responding and the ways that we do that will be individual to each of us.

I began by talking about the wafers which, in a while, will become, in some way for us, the body of Christ – however we may think of that.

In just a few moments we're going to license a number of new chalice assistants who have been brought to this point by God's work and prayer in them. They have responded and may we join in that circle of prayer, initiated by God, that relationship of prayer, with them and for them.
Amen.