

ALIVENESS IN THE ORDINARY

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE REV ERROL L NARAIN, AT ST EDMUND'S CHURCH,
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St. Francis

St. Francis of Assisi, canonized by Pope Gregory IX in the year 1228, was a non-dualist, mystic contemplative, friar, deacon and preacher. As a non-dualist, he saw God as present reality in this world, tangibly experienced through the spiritual practice of mystical contemplation. For him and all mystics, God's presence infects and infests mysteriously all of creation. Through faith, understood in relational terms, and mindful contemplation of this mystery, the mystic attains higher consciousness, unity, liberation, transformation, transfiguration and empowerment for living into God's goodness. For St. Francis, there was no dualistic world view where God dwelled up in heaven and people dwelled on the earth below. God's dwelling place was this Cosmos, this galaxy, this universe and this world. God's love for humankind and creation, precludes any idea of separation from this world; neither in space nor in time. It was inconceivable in St. Francis' personal experience that God sat remotely separated from this world, insulated from the human condition, with all its anxieties, fears and misfortunes. God was a present help in trouble. For the mystic all space is considered sacred space, all times is God's time, and God is present, continually performing the work of destruction and creation.

This non-dualist contemplative relationship with creation is illustrated in St. Francis' Canticle of the Sun. St. Francis in this Canticle, talks about his deep, personal relationship with nature. He addresses the sun, the moon, stars, trees, flowers, birds, and everything else created, as his brothers and sisters. No wonder he was sanctified as the patron saint of all creatures and creation!

There is a legendary story of St. Francis, a story of how in the middle of winter, he called out to the almond tree: Speak to me about God. The almond tree broke into blossom, witnessing to its hidden reality of being alive and not dead. The almond tree might not have bloomed immediately in chronological time, but it surely did in the *kairos* time of God- the time when all things come together, and falls into place to provide the perfect moment that makes things happen. St. Francis may not have got his miracle instantly in midwinter; the resurrection of the dead tree did happen when Spring had sprung that year. The moral is, wait a while and the miracles of life will happen as God partners with creation in the dance for life- not in ordinary chronological time, but in the *kairos* moment when 'all things come together for good for those who love the Lord'. Good photographers know this trick of the trade in the practice of their art. They always advise one to wait a while and the sun will provide the perfect moment, light at the right angle for the best picture. So too, is the experience of those who wait in contemplative practice. They experience the natural

miracle of divine presence, working in tandem with creation in the dance of life. If things are not going good in this moment of chronological time, wait for the moment of kairos- the auspicious moment of God's time.

Contemplation and God's Presence

The mystical contemplative tradition understands faith not as the adherence to a set of propositional beliefs as in apophatic theology and dogmatic religion. Faith for the contemplative mystic is discipleship, a life-long commitment to study/learning and discovery of this mysterious creation and an unknowable God. God is not a thought but a wonderful experience beyond human concept and personification. There is Biblical support for this theology in both the Hebrew and Christian Greek tradition. In the Hebrew Bible people 'walked and talked' with God. In the Christian Greek scriptures, St. Paul talked about that experience of God in which we live, move and have our being. Even Christian theologians talk about living in sacred space, the Ground of Being, the Eternal Now, and so on. This created world is alive with the Presence of God.

God being present in this world is the primary message of Easter to us who are the Easter people. In this period of 50 days after Easter Sunday, before the Sunday of Pentecost, a period called *mystagogia*. we as Easter people are challenged to rescue that lost tradition of non-dualist, God-present, mystical contemplative practice of the faith; to put on as a habit discipleship/ that will lead to the discovery, that in this world and creation, there is an aliveness in the ordinary- the ordinary walks we share with others, our conversations and meals we take with others, the natural sights and wonders in the beauty of sunrise and sunsets, the marvelous sights of landscapes and seascapes, the grandeur of mountains, canyons, seas and rivers, the flutter and flutter of bird and bees and the symphonic music of the night of God's fauna in their natural habitat. There is awful wonder of aliveness in the ordinary!

Luke 24:13-15

This is exactly the message of our gospel story today in Luke 24:13-35.

Our gospel story simply conveys a simple message that in an ordinary stroll, a walk with disciple (student) friends, bound together in common, anxious concerns, having deep conversation about the things that trouble the soul, they experience an empowering, powerful presence for personal transformation, transfiguration into the nature of the Divine, and courage to face the things from which they took flight. In the story, the disciples begin by seeking answers for questions that arise when propositional beliefs and dogmatic religion proves to be inadequate and small comfort in the face of the real life issues and challenges in the real world.

It is only through relational, contemplative practice with each other, in the simple acts of walking, sitting down and breaking bread- done in a mindful, alert, contemplative

way, that they experience the Presence of the immanent Ground of Being in the Eternal/*kairos* moment. This mystery of real presence penetrates their souls, warms the heart and energizes them to courageously engage the world.

In contemplation, all space is sacred space and within this space, the disciples receive gifts- the gift of liberation for their bondage of anxiety and fear; and the gift of pragmatic wisdom, 'fully measured and pressed down', for an empowered life, a transformed/ transfigured life, the new kind of human in this world. This world patiently waits the birth of a new kind of human, healers in anxious, troubled times. In Eastertide, God's mysterious presence in this universe, raises us from the deadness of midwinter, to the new life of Spring.

The Easter People

The period of *mystagogia*, the period of 50 days, which began with Easter Sunday, and continues until the Sunday of Pentecost, encourages us to contemplate the apparent mystery of new life in this universe. It is an essential part of our catechism curriculum for initiation/ baptism into the way of Jesus, the way of love. This is a spiritual exercise in contemplation that surpasses the rote learning of propositional beliefs and dogma.

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans states that the effect of the resurrection is like the sin of Adam, yet greater. The effect of Adam's sin was a catastrophic global epidemic, but the effect of the work of God's power that resurrects, is of cosmic proportion and effective to raise new kind of humans for a new way of living. There is now aliveness in the ordinary. As part of the created order, we are contaminated by this resurrection power, a presence so powerful, sufficient to transfigure/ transform us into the perfect likeness of eternal Goodness. By merely being obedient disciples/ learners, and putting on the habit of contemplation-, [not mere supplicatory prayer], that is the practice of alertness/ wakefulness/ mindfulness in this life, this presence of power is gracefully available to us as practical wisdom; for our healing from all fear and anxiety, and as essential power to be Jesus lovers in this world. The contemplative way is also a way of gratitude. If one is not grateful one is not living in the presence of God.

Conclusion

In a few minutes, in the next act of our liturgy, we as disciples will be sharing in the common meal of communion. Are you going to come to the table with a heart of gratitude and an attitude of mindfulness- gratitude for the sun, the moon, the stars, the birds, the bees, the flowers and the trees, for one another, this church, and this community, for family, friends, enemies, and ancestors; and being mindful of the aliveness in the ordinary?

If you contemplate by practicing mindfulness/ alertness, you are guaranteed a wonderful experience. You will know what a weighty thing is placed in your tiny hands. That bread that you will hold in the palm of your hands, is a weighty thing. It has the full weight of the mystery of God and of creation. As you contemplate the wondrous mystery of the broken bread, its beauty, the genius of its creation, its genesis, its journey in time and space, its potential energy, its elemental constitution, and so on, you will know something of the riddle of the wonderful history of love and its power for life. In that broken bread, in tiny hands, you hold the mystery of a present God who is a timely help in trouble, the healer of personal lives, and the lives of others who hurt and hope and wait for the healing touch of timely help from the Easter people. The Easter people are those who are disciples of Jesus, committed to a contemplative relationship with resurrection presence in creation and with others in this world.

There is aliveness in the ordinary of this universe. It is there for those who are disciples in the way of Jesus. The way is a contemplative way and the practice of mindfulness and alertness. Awake sleeper, rise from the dead.

Morning has Broken

Morning has broken like the first morning,
 Blackbird has spoken like the first bird.
 Praise for the singing,
 Praise for the morning,
 Praise for them springing fresh from the world.

Sweet the rain's new fall, sunlit from heaven,
 Like the first dewfall on the first grass.
 Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden,
 Sprung in completeness where his feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight,
 Mine is the morning,
 Born of the one light Eden saw play.
 Praise with elation, praise ev'ry morning,
 God's recreation of the new day.