

Friday (Evelyn Underhill)

In the days that are coming, I am sure that Christianity will have to move out from the churches and chapels, beautifying and enriching all levels of being, physical, social and mental as well as spiritual, telling the truth about God and man, casting its transfiguring radiance on the whole of that world in which man has to live, and in the light of this interpretation show mankind the way out of its confusions, misery and sins. Only those who have learned to look at the eternal with the disinterested loving gaze, who do see the stuff of common life with the light shining through it, will be able to do that.

Scripture (Isaiah 2:2-5)

It will happen in the final days that the mountain of the Lord's house will rise higher than the mountains and will tower above the heights. Then all the nations will stream to it, many peoples will come to it and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths.' Then he will judge between the nations and arbitrate between many peoples. They will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into sickles. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, no longer will they learn to make war. House of Jacob, come, let us walk in God's light.

martben1@btinternet.com

1st Week of Advent

Advent. A time to be practical idealists.

The season of Advent begins with Isaiah's prophecy and a sense of excitement. People are 'streaming' to the mountain of the Lord, (Isaiah 2:1-5). Anyone familiar with the Old Testament should know that if you go up a mountain, proceeding with caution is probably more advisable than streaming: people go up mountains to have a close encounter with God, and they come down changed. In this case, people want to be taught to walk in God's ways and to live by his Law. This clearly goes deeper than learning a set of rules as the conversion of weapons into ploughshares is not an experimental ceasefire, it is a whole new way of living – they don't put down their spears and swords, they turn them into farming tools. There will be, in other words, a complete conversion of the heart as people learn to put their trust in God.

This is all well and good, but reading it in the light of today's daily news of a divided and suffering world and of climate emergency, a world in which any streaming tends to be either online or to the shops as the preparations for the 'commercialised' Christmas get into full swing, it's reasonable to think that 'the day' (era) is still a long way off, or that Isaiah is being idealistic. If I think this, then since a prophet mediates what's in God's mind, I am saying, 'nice idea, God, but you're being too idealistic.'

So my next question would be 'when?'. According to St. Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome, I shouldn't be looking ahead because, 'You know "the time" has come,' (Rm 13:11-14). He urges people to live as people of the light, to recognise that day has already come. His language of night and day, light and dark symbolises that the reign of 'evil' has ended and the 'day' of God's rule has begun because of the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. As with Isaiah, people are to learn to walk in God's ways and to leave their old ways behind.

Paul is certainly being idealistic - urging people to live in an ideal way - but this does not mean he is being unrealistic. In his letter to Christians living in the midst of a culture which seems to quite happily prefer the old ways, (orgies and drunkenness, injustice, greed, malice, and many others in Rm. 1:28-30, the spotters' guide to living in the 'night'), Paul is not telling the Christians to keep away from 'that lot' because earlier in the chapter he tells people to go on living fully as citizens and now he says, 'Let your armour be the Lord', and you only put on armour if you are going into battle, to engage with people.

So too for us. Our preparations for celebrating the Incarnation, which was the dawning of the day Isaiah foretold, should be in the midst of 'the world': people who went up the mountain presumably returned home and lived their new way in the midst of people still living in the old ways. Our 'Mountain' where we learn God's ways is Jesus, the living Temple; our 'streaming' is the decisive response which Matthew 24:37-44 is clear that his presence calls for. As he is present among us, we have to 'stand ready', to respond to him as he comes to us in daily life. We can only be alert to his presence if we live 'in tune' with him, i.e. walk in his ways. This path will not lead us to some quiet secluded sanctuary, (at least, not for long), since God's vision is that all people will walk it.

Perhaps when we think of 'the real meaning of Christmas', we should not try to separate it from the 'commercial' Christmas and all that represents: our response should be to evangelise it.

Martin Bennett

Monday (Brother Lawrence)

I speak honestly and often of my way of approaching God. It all amounts to one good act of renunciation of everything which we recognize does not belong to God, in order to habituate ourselves to an unbroken converse with him without mystery or artificiality. It is an enormous self-deception to believe that the time of prayer must be different from any other. We are equally bound to be one with God by what we do in times of action as by the time of prayer at its special hour. We must not grow weary in doing little things for the love of God, who looks not to the greatness of the deed, but to the love. When this finally becomes habit it produces the action without our thinking about it, and with wondrous joy.

Scripture (Psalm 119:33-37)

Teach me, Lord, the way of your will, and I will observe it. Give me understanding and I will observe your Law, and keep it wholeheartedly. Guide me in the way of your commandments, for my delight is there. Bend my heart to your instructions, not to selfish gain. Avert my eyes from pointless images, by your word give me life.

Tuesday (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

How could Jesus' call to Levi immediately evoke obedience? We get the stupid question: surely he must have known Jesus before, and that previous acquaintance explains his readiness to hear the Master's call. Scripture displays not the slightest interest in the psychological reasons for a person's religious decisions for the simple reason that the cause behind the immediate following of call by response is Jesus Christ himself. The encounter is a testimony to the absolute, direct and unaccountable authority of Jesus. He has the authority to call and demand obedience to his word. Jesus summons us to follow him not as a teacher or a pattern of the good life, but as the Christ, the Son of God. In the call of Levi, Jesus Christ and his claim are proclaimed.

Scripture (John 8:23-26, 31-32)

Jesus said, 'You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I have told you already: you will die in your sins. Yes, if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.' So they said to him, 'Who are you?' Jesus answered: What I have told you from the outset. About you I have much to say and much to judge; but the one who sent me is true, and what I declare to the world I have learned from him. To the Jews who believed in him, Jesus said, 'If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples; you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Wednesday (Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius)

There are people whose desire is to want a thing or not to want it only according as God our Lord shall move their will, and as might appear to them personally to be more for the service and praise of God. In the meantime they wish to reckon themselves as having given the thing up totally in their hearts; and they draw upon all their powers to want neither this thing, nor anything else, unless it be solely the service of God our Lord that moves them. Thus it is the desire to be better able to serve God our Lord that will move them to be able to take the thing in question or to leave it.

Scripture (Ephesians 5:8-11, 15-17)

You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord; behave as children of the light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and uprightness and truth. Try to discover what the Lord wants of you, take no part in the futile works of darkness but, on the contrary, show them up for what they are. Be very careful about the sorts of lives you lead, like intelligent and not like senseless people. Make the best of the present time, for it is a wicked age. That is why you must not be thoughtless but must recognize what is the will of the Lord.

Thursday (Carlo Carretto)

Brother Charles de Foucauld faced a spiritual crisis which was to make him leave the monastery he loved and go in search of a religious life very different from the earlier one. He said "I no longer want a monastery which is secure." Had his spirit of prayer weakened? No, he had taken a step forward. He had decided to live the contemplative life on the streets, in a situation similar to that of any ordinary man. That step is much harder! It is the step that God wants mankind to make. He felt his calling was saying "You must go back among men, live your intimacy with God in the noise of the cities. And for this, the grace of God will not fail you."

Scripture (2 Cor. 5:17-18, 20-6:1).

For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old order is gone and a new being is there to see. It is all God's work; he reconciled us to himself through Christ and he gave us the ministry of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God were urging you through us, and in the name of Christ we appeal to you to be reconciled to God. For our sake he made the sinless one a victim for sin, so that in him we might become the uprightness of God. As his fellow workers, we urge you not to let the acceptance of his grace come to nothing.