

Reflection for Sunday 31st January 2021

With all the discussion about how to help children and young people through the pandemic, especially with their education, I couldn't help thinking about some of my own experiences in formal education. I was studying continuously, one way and another, well into adult life. As things stand, the final spell, in Seminary, in my thirties. But who knows? I believe it is never too late to study, learn and discuss insights with others. This, for me, is part of what makes life pleasurable and interesting. Anyway, what came back to me was an exam in Seminary; we took them orally, going before the professor 'Mastermind' style although without the low lights, black chair and John Humphrey's – and no audience. There are always some things to be grateful for! My memory took me back to an exam discussion on Protology, that branch of theology dealing with 'origins' and 'first things'. The Professor, a Jesuit Priest, asked how, as a future Priest, I would help people value and appreciate the environment. I can't remember exactly what I said, but it must have been somewhat convoluted as I can remember his reaction. 'Hmm...' he said, 'how about asking them how they are enjoying it?' It was a reminder about how theology and spirituality needs to connect with our real experiences.

Looking at the definition of enjoyment in the dictionary, I found 1. *The state or process of taking pleasure in something: 'the weather didn't mar our enjoyment of the trip.'* 2. *A thing that gives pleasure.* 3. *The fact of having and benefiting from something.*¹ This Sunday I see in the Gospel Jesus connecting with people's deepest needs and them benefiting from his presence. The Gospel reports: "*Jesus and his followers went as far as Capernaum, and as soon as the Sabbath came Jesus went to the synagogue and began to teach. And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority.*"² The authority reported here is rooted in the person of Jesus himself, and becomes rooted in the people because of what they encounter and enjoy by virtue of his presence and activity among them. Our encounters with Jesus in prayer, service and liturgy are invitations to enjoy: to take pleasure in his presence and activity among us, in having and benefiting from the ways in which his presence is with us and mediated to us each day. One way is the prayer of the Examen,³ not an exam, but an exercise in spiritual awareness, when we 'look back' to become aware of God's activity in our day; to be grateful for what we have enjoyed, especially his presence with us.

I know life is difficult for all of us presently and it may seem jarring to talk about enjoyment. But at the end of the week that has contained some grim news, being aware of the presence of God, who walks with us in good times and bad, and his gifts, can be a way of sustaining our flagging spirits and be a source of enjoyment. This gives us hope both now and for the future. At the end of my pilgrimage here on earth, which I hope is not just yet, I am also hoping for the healing judgement of God on my life, which I believe will eventually bring me fully into his loving and merciful presence. If, on 'judgement day' I am faced with how I enjoyed the gifts of God and helped others to enjoy these too, I might have just managed to appreciate the gift of life in a less convoluted way than that of my earlier years! The presence of Jesus freed the man in the synagogue possessed by an unclean spirit. It is right to pray that God, working with us and through us, will free the world from the grip this pandemic, but also free us to see those things we are meant not only to enjoy but also to care for. On this Racial Justice Sunday,⁴ I would think that includes the diversity of the creation of which we are all a part. God bless you, Canon David.

¹ Compact Oxford English Dictionary for Students, Oxford University Press, 2006

² Mark 1: 21-22

³ For example, <https://ignatianspirituality.com/examen-prayer-card/> There are other resources available.

⁴ <https://www.cbew.org.uk>