

7th Sunday of Easter (2020)

God's Quiet Presence in Our Lives

The poet, Rumi, submits that we live with a deep secret that sometimes we know, and then not.

That can be very helpful in understanding our faith. One of the reasons why we struggle with faith is that God's presence inside us and in our world is rarely dramatic, overwhelming, sensational, something impossible to ignore. God doesn't work like that. Rather God's presence, much to our frustration and loss of patience sometimes, is something that lies quiet and seemingly helpless inside us. It rarely makes a huge splash.

Because we are not sufficiently aware of this, we tend to misunderstand the dynamics of faith and find ourselves habitually trying to ground our faith on precisely something that is loud and dramatic. We are forever looking for something beyond what God gives us. But we should know from the very way God was born into our world, that faith needs to ground itself on something that is quiet and undramatic. Jesus, as we know, was born into our world with no fanfare and no power, a baby lying helpless in the straw, another child among millions. Nothing spectacular to human eyes surrounded his birth. Then, during his ministry, he never performed miracles to prove his divinity; but only as acts of compassion or to reveal something about God. Jesus never used divine power in an attempt to prove that God exists, beyond doubt. His ministry, like his birth, wasn't an attempt to prove God's existence. It was intended rather to teach us what God is like and that God loves us unconditionally.

Moreover, Jesus' teaching about God's presence in our lives also makes clear that this presence is mostly quiet and hidden, a plant growing silently as we sleep, yeast leavening dough in a manner hidden from our eyes, summer slowly turning a barren tree green, an insignificant mustard plant eventually surprising us with its growth, a man or woman forgiving an enemy. God, it seems, works in ways that are quiet and hidden from our eyes. The God that Jesus incarnates is neither dramatic nor splashy.

And there's an important faith-lesson in this. Simply put, God lies inside us, deep inside, but in a way that's almost non-existent, almost unfelt, largely unnoticed, and easily ignored. However, while that presence is never overpowering, it has within it a gentle, unremitting imperative, a compulsion towards something higher, which invites us to draw upon it. And, if we do draw upon it, it gushes up in us in an infinite stream that instructs us, nurtures us, and fills us with endless energy.

This is important for understanding faith. God lies inside us as an invitation that fully respects our freedom, never overpowers us; but also never goes away. It lies there precisely like a baby lying helpless in the straw, gently beckoning us, but helpless in itself to make us pick it up.

For example, C. S. Lewis, in explaining why he finally became, in his words, "the most reluctant convert in the history of Christendom," writes that, for years, he was able to effectively ignore a voice inside him, precisely, because it was almost non-existent, almost unfelt, and largely unnoticed. On the other hand, in retrospect, he realized it had always been there, a gentle, incessant nudge, beckoning him to draw from it, something he eventually recognized as a gentle, but unyielding, imperative, a "compulsion" which, if obeyed, leads to liberation.

Ruth Burrows, the British Carmelite and mystic, describes a similar experience in her autobiography, *Before the Living God*. Chronicling her late adolescent years, Burrows describes both her religious flightiness and her lack of attraction to the religious life at that time in her life. Yet she eventually ends up not only being serious about religion but becoming a Carmelite nun. What happened? One day, in a chapel, almost against her will, triggered by a series of accidental circumstances, she opened herself to voice inside her that she had, until then, mainly ignored because it lay inside her precisely as a voice that was almost non-existent, almost unfelt, and largely unnoticed. But once touched, it gushed up as the deepest and most real thing inside her and set the direction of her life forever afterwards. Like C. S. Lewis, she too, once she had opened herself to it, felt it as an unyielding moral compulsion opening her to ultimate liberation.

Why doesn't God show himself to us more directly and more powerfully so as to make faith easier? That's a fair question for which, partly, there is no fully satisfying answer. But the answer we do have lies in understanding the manner in which God manifests himself in our lives and in our world. Unlike most everything else that's trying to get our attention, God never tries to overwhelm us. God, more than anyone else, respects our freedom. For this reason, God lies everywhere, inside us and around us, almost unfelt, largely unnoticed, and easily ignored, a quiet, gentle nudge; but, if drawn upon, the ultimate stream of love and energy.

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