

## On getting down on my knees

I woke up this morning and lay for a while, thinking about the day ahead – things to do, people to meet and then, with my mind still occupied, I got out of bed and flopped to my knees to make my morning offering. I went down on my knees out of habit, a habit I have been cultivating for several months now, but as I began my prayer – on my knees before my God and thinking about the day ahead – I knew I was in the right place. The more I live, the more I realise that the world does not run according to my *dictat* and despite my best efforts, a day can go wildly wrong, but I also know that a bad day can become a time of high adventure, if I let the Lord share it and guide it. My newly acquired habit of getting down on my knees, when I get out of bed, opens me up to the Lord's guidance and so also the possibility of such an adventure. Habit can be a wonderful thing.

I acquired the habit of making a morning offering as a child, kneeling by my bed, but the world then seemed a much surer and safer place and whereas the words of my prayer said that I wanted to give the day to the Lord, I had yet to come to understand in what way I depended on him and how disastrously wrong a day – and a life - could go, if left to my own designs. Nevertheless, habits like this are important, because they put in place things which, one day, will be needed – and so when that day comes we know where to look.

Habits, however, can also close us up as well. When I began to train for the priesthood I found myself surrounded by rules and customs, grown up over the ages, and designed to help develop habits of prayer and conduct – and they did just that. But they also helped make my world such a regulated and safe place that the uncertainty, which is needed to see the hand of God, was rather lacking. I had not yet realised that rule and custom are man-made and while they could help bring me into the realm of God, they did not delineate the action of God. In other words, God can, and sometimes does, call us to work outside of what is dictated by our habits and customs – however good they may be - and even, on occasions, in contradiction to them. However, I had still to learn this and so, in my rather safe and sure seminary world – a world in which there were so many other prayers and readings to be said - my habit of making a morning offering lapsed, for the bell, when it sounded in the morning, summoning me to the Chapel for prayer, gave me very little time to get there.

Missionary life, on the other hand, was not well regulated; it did not have a comfortable rhythm. There were days, and even weeks, spent travelling in open boats from longhouse to longhouse; all of which made it impossible to have that all-encompassing prayer life, which can conspire to keep the God of uncertainties out. Upsets can occur and in one such upset I heard the Lord asking if he could come in. I was travelling upriver with another priest and, because of low water, we could not get to the longhouse where we were expected, so we slept the night on the floor of a Chinese shop. I was the first to wake up in the morning and happened to be watching, when my friend awoke. He immediately sat up, made the sign of the cross and then made what I took to be his morning offering. Memories stirred and the difficulties of our journey – and the uncertainties surrounding my missionary work in general – became the stuff of the Lord's invitation, asking me share my work with him – and not just work for him as I realise I had been doing. It was a seminal moment for me and I began once more to start the day with a morning offering.

I trained myself to make the prayer as I was getting out of bed in the morning. When I threw my legs over the side of the bed, ready to get up, I would first pause, make the sign of the cross and offer the day to the Lord. The form of the prayer varies according to what I am facing and according to what time I have, but even if I oversleep and am in a hurry, I still make the sign of the cross albeit only accompanied by the hasty prayer, "Lord, please don't leave me alone today!" Not every morning prayer is as intense as when I face a particular crisis, but it does not have to be so. A habit derives its strength and meaning from the initial decision to cultivate it and is borne along by the love, which inspired it in the first place, even though a crisis on a certain day may blot out the awareness of that love at the moment of making the prayer. I remember reading that Judy Dench's late husband sent her a red rose everyday of their married life. I am sure that he had a standing order with the florist for that and I am also sure that sometimes, when he was away, he may have forgotten that it was being sent, but nevertheless it remained an act of love despite all those distractions, because it lived through the loved, which inspired

## On getting down on my knees

him initially to cultivate that habit. The weekly letter home, or nowadays the phone call or e-mail, can also do the same – they can keep our lives open to love for without those habits and those self-made rules, we would have to find the psychic energy every time to invent a new act of love - and would probably fail at it.

It is not enough, though, to rest content with these habits and rules we have established. We need periodically to stop and examine them and ask whether these habits still help us to live well - or whether we have changed and now live for our habits! The change from one position to the other can steal up on us unawares and that which began by opening us up in love and friendship can become a prison, cutting us off from the very things we once treasured. As a young man, I had a close friend and we got into the habit of meeting on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturday evenings. I used to look forward to those evenings, for I knew that my friend, who was a great man of habit, would always be there on those evenings, unless something very serious happened. I moved away, but each time I met my friend, when on holiday, I found that his week had become more and more regulated – each evening being marked with a certain activity – and it became increasingly rigid. He had two close friends, whom he would visit on Tuesday evenings – and this gradually became every Tuesday evening without fail, until in the end those friends asked him to stop coming, because they felt imprisoned by his routine. My friend, however, was unable to vary his visits and so he stopped going at all and so what had begun as a way of being open to friendship ended up as a prison which cut him off from that very friendship. Habits, in themselves, are neither good nor bad. Their value depends on whether they open us up to love – together with the uncertainty that true love demands - or whether they cut us off from all uncertainty – and in doing so cut us off from true love and friendship. And what is true for man is also true for God.

So - back to my newly acquired habit of flopping to my knees in the morning – does it invite God in or keep him out? I chose to come to this land of Bali where I did not know anyone, because in the uncertainty of such a venture I felt the thrill of what God might do here. In some ways, it is similar to when I first went to Borneo as a young priest and entered a world different to anything I had thought of or imagined. There is, however, one difference: as a young man, I went out eager to work for the Lord, but now, as an older man, I am much more aware that *"unless the Lord builds the house, in vain do the builders labour"* – and this means I have to accept that I cannot second guess what the Lord is going to do. I live with uncertainty and look for the "coincidences" in which I sometimes see him smile. And so I flop to my knees every morning and know I am in the right place. I know the Lord is not going to "fix" the day for me, but I know that by handing over the day I have a better chance of seeing where he is leading. And even though I do miss it, I am not worried, because there on my knees, I am making an act of love and trust in my God – and I know that he, the Great Lover, is not going to let that come to naught.

### Diary

My world has been a more uncertain place than usual this last week. I have found a place to live from September onwards – a house overlooking terraced padi fields and I needed to give the first instalment by a certain date. No trouble, I thought, I can withdraw the money from the ATM machine using my debit card and credit cards. I needed quite a lot of money and because of the limits, imposed by the banks on withdrawing money, I would need to make several withdrawals over several days. However, after the first withdrawals the ATM machines refused my cards. I went from bank to bank all with the same result. My own bank, HSBC, refuses to give the telephone number of the branch in UK where my account is and a letter to the bank takes two weeks from here – and they always insist on writing back, not e-mailing – so I was in trouble because of the deadline. So, finding myself on my knees yesterday, I said to the Lord, "I am in trouble". The idea then came to use internet banking to e-mail an enquiry, which I did and discovered that the fraud squad had put a block on all my cards because the withdrawals were unusual. They then gave me a telephone number to call. I did so and now have the money for the deposit.

There is an English speaking community in the making here. It began with a few people getting together to form a choir during Holy Week and with the encouragement of the PP they are becoming a regular choir. They do not sing every week as there are plenty of choirs round about who want to sing in

## **On getting down on my knees**

English at the Sunday evening Mass. However, they singing twice a month and their weekly practices are forming them into a group and we are going to have a choir get-together and meal next week – shades of Reading! The weekly Mass attendance is 600, so we cannot yet throw it open to the whole congregation yet, but it is a beginning. We are going to have a "Synod" in July and see how we can go further, with things like instruction for children and adults, discussion groups etc.

The kernel of the group – four Filipina ladies – took me for a meal and then on to see Spiderman last Sunday evening. Great evening!

There are Nine Australians in jail for drug smuggling at the prison where I say Mass each Tuesday. They are known as the Bali Nine and three of them, who were mules in the operation, were sentenced to life imprisonment and when they appealed they received the death sentence. They are in the process of trying to appeal the death sentence at the moment. Please pray for them – they are all in their 20's.

God bless,

Terry