

To Know Him in Darkness

I have been working on a blog for some days now and thinking about it for even longer, but it is not cooked yet and so, this morning, I decided to put it on the back burner and wait for it to mature. However, when I then looked around for something else to write about, I discovered I was blank - I found myself face-to-face with emptiness. It is quite scary to come up against nothing rather than something.

I found myself thinking about Claudius, a friend of mine in East Malaysia, who also used to be my student at one time. He is a Dayak and I had sent him greetings because 1st June is Dayak New Year, but I did not expect him to reply, because for over two years now he has been suffering from a particularly nasty form of cancer, deep inside his nasal cavities, and I know that, at times, he is in tremendous pain. However, he did reply and thanked me for my message and, when I asked him how he was, he told me that he had recently come out of hospital, where he had been taken due to a bad reaction to his latest chemotherapy treatment. He then added, "God my Father is so good to me, for the doctors say I was dying when I was taken into hospital."

Over the last two years, when talking with Claudius or reading his messages, I have noticed that his faith and trust in God seem to be getting deeper and stronger the more the cancer ravages his body. I find myself deeply moved by this, for I know that when his cancer was first diagnosed, he went to many places of pilgrimage throughout the world, asking for a cure. His prayers have been met with "nothingness", but rather than casting him down into deep depression, that nothingness seems to have enfolded him in arms of compassion and love and given him a serenity beyond my understanding. Instead of giving him something to hold on to, the love of God has given him nothing – but this nothing seems to be drawing him into the heart of God.

When I was training for the priesthood, I learnt that there are two ways of coming to God – the "path of knowing" and the "path of non-knowing", but this all remained mere "book knowledge", until I was brought face to face with these two ways in the people to whom I was called to minister, and then at various times in my own life- journey - and now, once more, in my texting and talks with Claudius.

We first come to know the touch of God through positive things and I can still remember feeling his presence, when my Mum first taught me how to light a candle and offer it as a prayer - and since that time, there have been many such experiences, which came through people, symbols and places. These have been comforting and sometimes even exhilarating experiences. In theology, this is known as the "positive path to God" or "kataphatic theology". However, there are also times, when we come face to face with the "absence of God" – when we are faced with tremendous tragedy or atrocity, which causes us to cry out, "Where is God?" For some, these become occasions to reject God, but for others they become moments, when they experience God in a profoundly new and much deeper way. They come to know him in his nothingness and are drawn into a much deeper embrace of faith. This is known as "the negative path to God" or "apophatic theology". This disturbing aspect of faith brings us before the profound mystery that while "things" can be the sacraments or means, whereby we are touched by God and so be drawn into knowing and loving him, nevertheless, God is not a thing and cannot be known as a thing. God is "no-thing" and at some times in our lives we are brought face to face with this "no-thingness of God", and this is necessary, if we are to become one with him at this deeper and more profound level of love and trust.

There have been a few occasions in my own life when, despite my prayers and hopes, I have had to face situations, which made no sense – and face them not as an onlooker, but as a participant. To go forward seemed to be the road to chaos, to the destruction of all that I valued. On these, thankfully rare, occasions, there has not been an alternative road to the one facing me, but there has been an alternative attitude towards engaging with that situation - I could have entered it in rebellion, rejecting the situation and everything about it, but, instead, I found myself being drawn, by grace, to enter in trust. I found myself walking into situations, of which I had no understanding, which held no reason I could grasp, which offered "no thing" that I could hold on to for comfort – but in that nothingness I found myself drawn into a companionship and a love, far deeper than anything I had known. I look back with a sense of awe to

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those few occasions, where I brought to know God in this way, and I am awed when I see Claudius, and others, coming to know God in a nothingness, far more radical than anything I have ever experienced.

So, having found myself this week with nothing to say, I have done just that and spoken about nothing, but maybe, in doing so, I have spoken of more than "every thing" put together.

Diary

I have decided that there is something about my cultural background that makes it very difficult for me to adequately assess a situation. I have found a place to stay when the lease on my present house runs out in August. I was head-hunted by someone who had been promised a commission by the owner of the house. When we sat down to agree upon price, two others turned up and all claimed part of the commission – not from me, but from the owner of the house. However, there has been some jiggery-pokery going on about the commission, and one guy, who I hope will act as handy-man to me in future, thought he was going to be cheated out of part of it. So, he kept phoning a friend of mine, an Indonesian, who has acted as go-between for me. This friend has been saying to me that I should say something about this guy's commission to the owner. My reaction is to say that it is no concern of mine – but I am sure that I am missing something, for my friend obviously thinks it is, or rather should be also my concern.

My future financing here is now coming up for discussion and we are going to try, at my suggestion, an envelope scheme to see whether this will raise enough for living costs. I think it should work as there are about 500 at Mass on a Sunday evening, but as this is over and above the ordinary collection, raises a question. So, we cast out into the deep.

God bless,

Terry