

12th July

I sometimes use a small meditation book, which has thoughts for each day of the year and as I opened it, this morning, I saw that today's date was 12th July, Orangemen's Day. This Day commemorates a victory of the Protestants over the Catholics in Northern Ireland, some hundreds of years ago, but a victory still remembered and celebrated with marches by the radical Protestants of Northern Ireland – and these marches usually go through traditionally Catholic areas. A Catholic classmate of mine at seminary, from Northern Ireland, once told me of the fear the sound of those drums produced in the hearts of his community, a fear produced by bigotry and hatred. But it was not the fear that I found myself thinking about this morning, but bigotry, prejudice, that unreasoning hatred or disdain of others, who are “different” from us that we inherit with our mother's milk.

In the Christian tradition, we talk about “original sin”, and this can also be understood in terms of the prejudices that we inherit from our families. We, all of us, have them somewhere in us. We have only to turn a few stones, when looking at our attitudes towards others, to discover traces of them hidden underneath. True, we often disguise them as something else: a lack of education, social nicety, manners, difference of religion etc., but when we peer underneath these terms, which try to give them a reasoned respectability, they stand exposed for what they are: “bigotry” – or, as the dictionary puts it, “blind intolerance”. But, having discovered them rooted in our heart, the problem remains, how do we get rid of it? They will not go away just because we recognise them for what they are. We need help; we need a power, which is greater than our own abilities; we need God.

I have a book on the steps involved in spiritual growth and this also deals with the problem of ingrained faults and bad attitudes, such as prejudice, that we discover in ourselves. It teaches that there were two steps involved in this process of asking God's help:

1. We have to be entirely ready to have God remove these faults.
2. We must humbly ask God to remove these faults.

When I first read this, I was puzzled as to why the book divides this process in two. Surely, I thought, as soon as you recognise a fault you should just ask God to take it away. However, the more I thought about these two steps – and tried to work them - the more I realised the wisdom of making them two steps. For, I may indeed recognise that I have such a fault and I may indeed ask God to remove that fault, but so devious are we in our spiritual lives that I may overlook that, in actual fact, I do not really want to lose that fault, even though I say the words, asking God to remove it. Prejudice and suchlike attitudes have deep, deep roots!

So, what do I do, when I ask myself something like: “Do you really want to mix with and be friends with “those” people?” and I discover that my honest answer is “No!”? Is that the end? Do I have to content myself with a spiritual life tainted with prejudice and suchlike unsavoury attitudes? The answer to this is also, “No!”, but I have to remember that the spiritual life is a science as well as an art. I can't just wish this reluctance away. I have to go down into my heart and look at that reluctance and then ask myself, “Do I want God to take away this reluctance?” If the answer to that is a ‘yes’, then I am fine, but it may be that I again answer “No!” Should this be so, I need to ask the guidance of the Holy Spirit and go down still further to the roots, until I eventually come to the place where I can say, “Yes, Lord, I am ready, please take it away”. Then, I will have given the Lord permission to work on me. Then grace can work. Then the drums can stop their deadly work.

Diary

I have a friend who stays with me sometimes, but his work also takes him to other places as well. When he is away, he kindly loans me his car, but when he is back I revert again to my motorbike. It is a bit like Hobson's choice – when he is away I miss his company, but enjoy his car; when he is back, I enjoy his company, but miss his car! He arrived back about a week ago and I am enjoying both his companionship and his advice in buying things for the new house I will be moving into when I return from Sarawak in November, but it means that I am back to my motorbike – and maybe I am getting a little old to be a “kamikaze kid” as one of my nephews irreverently describes me.

This coming Tuesday, I will be baptising a Muslim woman in Prison. She has been asking for baptism for a long time. She tells me that all her family are Catholics, all except her, but I have not been able to understand how this happened. I must admit that I am a little nervous, for were I in Malaysia and it was discovered that I had baptised a Muslim, I would be expelled from the country immediately and banned from entering again – and were that in Kelantan, a West Malaysian state, I would probably be caned and imprisoned before being expelled. Indonesia, however, is much more tolerant – I hope! So, please pray for her – and me! She asked me to choose her Christian name for her and I gave her the name Margarethe.

God bless,

Terry