

In his poem, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake says; **'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.'**

Last week we had a think about the most important friendship that we have. The friendship that will last beyond a life-time and gives us life. Some people work so hard at their relationship with God that those around them can physically see and feel it. Two weeks ago, we explored this a little as we reflected upon what life lived in true friendship with God can do to us as individuals, we recalled the way Moses' face shone with holiness as he descended the mountain after talking to God. And we also reflected on all those people we knew who had a depth of holiness that seemed to radiate from them in similar ways. This happens because they have spent time attending to the friendship that exists in the centre of their souls. The friendship that contains the life-force of the God who created us.

As my Lent book this year, I have been reading an excellent modern spiritual classic called: *Into the Silent Land*, by Martin Laird.

In it he tells a story of a young man who has taken to getting a sharp knife and cutting himself. Why? Because deep inside there is a pain that he cannot fathom nor overcome. 'As long as I can remember', the young man says, 'I have had this hurt inside. I can't get away from it, and sometimes I cut or burn myself so that the pain will appear in a different place.'

Did you know that a staggering 13% of young people between 11 and 16 harm themselves in this way and in 2014 there was a 70% increase in those aged between 10 and 14 attending A &E because of a self-harm incident!

Interestingly, the young gentleman who Martin Laird focusses upon eventually seeks the help of his prison chaplaincy and after just 4 weeks

of meditating for 30 minutes morning and night, he notices a marked reduction in both the feeling of deep down hurt and the belief that self-harming could help ease it in some way.

Laird then goes on to quote another young person, who has gone through a similar experience. This perceptive young man says: “All beings, no matter how reactionary, fearful, dangerous or lost, can open themselves up to the sacred within and become free. I have become free even in prison. Prison has become my perfect monastery.”

‘If the doors of (*our*) perception were cleansed everything would appear to (*us*) as it is, Infinite.’

In God we have a friendship based on truth, where we can be who we truly are. We can let God into our darkest places, knowing that he will understand and only make things better. God is the only friend with whom we don’t have to pretend. He knows our joys and our sadnesses. He lives through our rejoicing and our pain. He is the friend who will not turn his back on us. God is the only friend who is with us at our beginning and end. This is what prompts the anonymous author of the ancient spiritual classic, the Cloud of the Unknowing, to say, ‘God is your being’. A sentiment that St Paul coheres with when speaking to the leaders of Athens and says, in God ‘we live and move and have our being.’¹ As the medieval Spanish monk and mystic, St John of the Cross, so succinctly puts it, God is simply our ‘centre’. God is our centre and only his love makes us whole.

This is the same God who meets Abram in the wilderness and speaks into his heart, saying: “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ And even after Abram questions him and shows a lack of trust, God still strikes up a covenant with him saying,

¹ Acts 17:28

“To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’.

Abram’s descendants do indeed inherit all that God promises him, and despite their stubbornness, the hardness of their hearts and their constant turning away from God to attend to their own selfish ways, God does not leave them in the pit of their own making. He sends his own son so that they may see more clearly what friendship with God entails.

What a blessing it is that Christ formed his church to continue what he started. That motley crew of apostles and disciples who, in spite of their own failings seem to almost stumble upon the truth that God is at our centre, all in all. They pass on the ways that reveal who God really is, so that all may strengthen their friendship with him. By his grace, we are the latest chapter of that same body which has continued for over 2000 years. Like them, we should feel proud to declare ourselves his children!

So remarkable and generous is the God we love that St John the Apostle, in his first letter, runs out of words trying to adequately describe him. He has to simply settle with the profound statement that ‘God is love’.

God is Love in its broadest sense, of course. God is, at one and the same time, intimate love, merciful love, rebuking love, compassionate love, gentle love, challenging love, encouraging love. God’s love can scare us and yet we know that it is our destiny. His love is as purifying as the fire and yet as cleansing as mountain dew.

What a blessing it is that he has called each of us to be his disciples, to inhabit and serve that same church, to build it up and walk in the precious footsteps of some of the holiest people to have lived. How privileged we are to have been trusted with the mantle of passing on his church’s traditions so that every individual may come to know the

God at their centre. In our unity of devotion and community of holiness, we reveal aspects of the God who is infinitely mysterious and endless in his mercy.

But we should not expect the world to make our job easy. We must expect that there will be tough decisions to be taken and sacrifices to be made. St Paul, in today's second reading, warns us that many live as 'enemies of the Cross of Christ'.

We hear a little of the lengths to which those enemies of Christ would go, in our Gospel reading today. 'some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'"

When the world begins to oppose us, it can badly affect our relationship with the God at our centre.

Paul realises that what he deems as 'the enemies of Christ' would shatter the sacred body of Christ's Church if they possibly could, by whatever means they may. This leads him to plead: 'stand firm in the faith' and follow in the example that he and the other apostles have set.

St John again gives us some succinct yet helpful words: 'No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.'

God is our centre. The centre of ourselves, the centre of our community, the centre of our world.

'If the doors of (*our*) perception were cleansed everything would appear to (*us*) as it is, Infinite.'

We would see God at our core.

Amen.