

The Reverend Geoffrey Howard

Acts 4.32-35

John 20.19-end

On a visit to America a reporter once asked that holy man, Archbishop Michael Ramsay, how long he prayed each day. He answered, Two minutes. Only two minutes, exclaimed his interrogator, I spend thirty minutes on my knees, explained the Archbishop, but only about two minutes praying.

I suspect we all know what he meant. I certainly do. Whenever I get down to the business of prayer I find my mind so full of distractions that often it feels like a complete waste of time.

There are several ways which have helped deal with this. One is to make the distractions themselves the subject of my prayers, it's a bit like Judo where you use your opponents strength to defeat him; another is to use a mantra, the repetition of a word or a phrase helps to keep distractions at bay; and when as a parish priest I led a meditation group I would often suggest that we each thought of a place where we had discovered a sense of God's presence, often a silent, solitary place - maybe a church, a seashore, a forest, a garden.

All of us, I suspect, carry such a space within to which we can return in our imagination. I have two such places: one is the chapel in a Benedictine Abbey; the other only exists in my imagination - a circular, underground cavern with an altar and a pool of clear water, and ranged around whose walls are those who have influenced my life for good, a secret place which belongs only to me.

I like to imagine that for the first disciples such a place was the Upper Room where the events of this morning's gospel occurred. A place where they must have relived the events of the previous days, trying to make sense out of that which was apparently senseless. A place of reflection. Why? was on all their lips. Huddled together, whispering, terrified, they tried to unravel the tangled knot of circumstances that had led them there. Some of them had witnessed the Crucifixion, heard the thud of the hammer on the nails and the cry of dereliction, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Where was God in all this? must have been the besetting mystery with which they struggled.

An ancient Christian exercise for damaged people, which includes all of us, is the healing of memories. In imagination, usually with the help of a spiritual director, an unresolved, destructive experience from one's past is relived - those involved, the place, the sounds, smells, colours, especially the feelings, associated with it. It is not a comfortable experience. I think it resembles psychoanalysis, except that here the damaged person is required to ask the question, Where was Jesus, where was God in it all? It implies that in even the most destructive and apparently meaningless situations God can be discovered.

Furthermore, our calling is to be a thoughtful, reflective people, those who do not use their religion as a protection against the hard questions life throws up - the pains of memory, the contradictions that faith must wrestle with, the horrors that surround us. If the history of Christian spirituality is to be believed many of these problems may be illuminated and given some meaning in the place of silence and reflection, the Upper Room hidden deep within us. For the disciples the Upper Room was the place of recognition.

They recognised Jesus. Reach your finger here, see my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side, were his instructions to Thomas. My Lord and my God, he exclaimed. A strange God for a Jew to recognise and confess. A wounded God! One who shares his creatures vulnerability and pain and puts it to good account. One who brings life out of death.

They recognised themselves. Like us they must have sought to avoid this. But here there was no escape. They had all shared Peter's affirmation, Though everyone deny you, I won't. Yet at his hour of greatest need they had all forsaken him and fled. How could they ever face him again? How hold up their heads? The Upper Room was where they had to start doing so and discovered that all that the outstretched hands carried were wounds, the wounds of persistent love and the promise of a new beginning. The Upper Room was the place of reconciliation where they returned to God, to each other and to themselves. Before becoming the BBC's Religious Affairs correspondent, Gerald Priestland was a distinguished foreign correspondent. Yet, despite his success, for most of his life he had suffered from depression and the combined effect of reporting from Vietnam, the ghetto riots in the States and the assassination of the Kennedy brothers pushed him over the edge into a profound and dangerous breakdown. It was whilst being treated by a Jewish psychoanalyst, an atheist, that he rediscovered his Christian faith. Priestland once interviewed Metropolitan Antony Bloom, who said to him, It is easy never to take the risk of diving into the depths and facing the terrors of the deep. The result is living superficially, we are never able to reach out to God, because God is deep. And at the same time we prove unable to reach out to our neighbour, because our neighbour can only meet us in the depths. Reporting this encounter Priestland added, Quakers have a saying, The silence brings unity, and I found this unity in the silent depths, unity with God and with my fellow human beings, an image of great power.

The image of the Upper Room shares something of this power. It too calls us away from superficiality. The steps up to this room led into the depths and from those depths the disciples emerged bearing the Pearl of Great Price, and so may we, if with them we dare to take the plunge.