Reflection

10th May, 2020

Our daily exercise consists of crossing the Cherry Hinton Road and going into Cherry Hinton park. We go round it twice. Whoever owned the park in the last century planted a lot of exotic trees in amongst native varieties: Californian redwoods, Japanese pagoda trees, Norwegian maples. It has been a joy to watch them come into leaf day by day. Some like the Horse Chestnuts early in their full glory before the beeches have even started.

We’ve discovered an avenue which runs parallel to Cherry Hinton road – out of clouds of cow parsley majestic beech trees rise, now in leaf. It’s like walking down a nave with a vault of freshest green – the silence full of birdsong. Next year it won’t be the same as the birdsong will be drowned by the roar of restored traffic up and down the road.

There will be some regrets when this lockdown is over. People have loved being surrounded by birdsong and breathing air that is fresh. There won’t be prides of lions having their siestas sprawled across South African golf courses. There won’t be dolphins gliding up the Grand Canal in Venice followed by shoals of fish basking in the newly pristine waters of the Venetian lagoon. There won’t be kangaroos lolloping down the high streets of Australian towns or sheep eating garden flowers in Welsh villages. The newly blue skies over Delhi will revert to their disgusting brown and mothers in Beijing who can now breathe will worry about their children choking to death on toxic smog.

In fact many of the things we should have been doing in response to climate change have happened by default in the lockdown and all the indicators have shown improvements, some dramatic. The planet has breathed.

But we know this can’t go on. People have to go to work. I want to go to London to see my daughter and granddaughter. I want to go to Germany to see my grandchildren there – or I want them to come here. The conference my son was supposed to be going to in South Korea will now happen on Zoom. Maybe next year it will also be done on Zoom. Let us hope that we don’t revert to normal but to a new normal because lessons have been learned in this lockdown. We don’t know the way out of the lockdown yet, probably slowly, bit by bit, trial and error, advances and retreats.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says to the disciples: “You know the Way.” Good old Thomas who always said what everyone else was thinking but didn’t dare say, who always asked what everyone else wanted to ask but didn’t dare, said: “We don’t know where you are going. How can we know the Way?” And Jesus said: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. The ultimate truth. The Way is love. The truth is love. Life is Love. Love makes life worth living.

Some people get this straight away, often children, but, sadly, some grow up to forget it. In my work I have met many people who have got it, who have love at the heart and who are wonderful. I’ve also met pillars of the church, even some clergy, who haven’t got this and as a result they cause endless trouble and heartache.

If there’s one lesson from this lockdown it is that love is the key. People we know are desperate to see their children and grandchildren, their families and friends. Zoom is nice but ultimately it doesn’t cut it. We know it will be great to be back in church together and we won’t take having coffee afterwards for granted for some time.

I may have been fantasising about having a cappuccino in the main piazza in Siena and I have been thinking about giving my granddaughter Anna a hug. In the past I might have prioritised the cappuccino in Siena on the grounds that I can give Anna a hug any time I like but now that I can do neither it’s obvious that a cappuccino is neither here nor there. But a hug with Anna is not.

We have behaved like masters of the universe, doing what we like, going where we please, but we have been stopped in our tracks by this nasty little virus and humbled. We thought we’d closed our borders and taken back control but this little virus thinks that’s a joke. It’s no respecter of persons. It doesn’t care who you are or where you are. It will find a way.

This little virus has concentrated our minds and we’ve realised that what we miss most is the people we love and care about. In the past it was easy to take them for granted but it isn’t now. Let us hope that we who have been through this won’t forget that any time soon.

And let us pray that we will be able to work out a new normal that we won’t forget the sound of birdsong, that we will find ways of living that lets the planet breathe – because we know, one way or another, we have to do that.

Christians have been called “the people of the Way” because they follow Jesus, who is the Way. For us the way ahead in the short term is uncertain, but in the long term we know it. Love is the thing. Love is the Way and it has taken a lockdown to show us this Way again.