

I said to the almond tree, "Sister, speak to me of God".

And the almond tree blossomed.

This morning while out walking, I noticed that the first little pink peach blossoms had appeared. There they were, clustered on the tiny branch of an otherwise bare and rather scrappy little peach tree. But what joy they brought me - they spoke of aliveness. I once had such a tree in my own garden, right up against my bedroom window. It wasn't much of a tree really and didn't bear much fruit, but I did love that tree, for every year, way before any other signs of spring, that little tree would burst into bloom. This morning I thought of my tree and also of Francis of Assisi who, according to legend, called out to an almond tree in midwinter, "Sister, speak to me of God"! And at once the tree burst into bloom. It came alive. The only way to witness to God is by aliveness!

This is an ancient understanding. In the second century ce, Irenaeus, who was a bishop, said that the glory of God is a human being who is fully alive. There are certainly many different ways of understanding what it may mean to be fully alive and they would reflect different personality types too. And for each of us, this may shift as the years pass and we enter different stages of life with their opportunities and limitations. Each of us will have particular activities, experiences, work and relationships that we embrace and eagerly turn to because they do make us feel alive. But in its most real sense aliveness is about being awake, aware or enlightened. Anthony De Mello, who was a great Indian Jesuit spiritual teacher, said that "most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they die in their sleep. They never understand the loveliness, the beauty and the sacredness of this thing that we call human existence. What we need to do is wake up! Listen! Live! Be fully alive"! These are beautiful and profound words, this call to "the loveliness, the beauty and the sacredness of this thing that we call human existence". But just how might we wake up?

We come alive in and through our humanness, certainly not by trying to escape it or deny it. In the past our Christian spiritual tradition was unfortunately responsible for many life-denying attitudes and practices, all in an effort to escape the prison of this earthly existence and ascend to a higher state of being where it was believed God was to be found. This life was seen as preparation for the next life. In such thinking the body was seen as sinful and the cause of temptation, and pleasure was to be denied. There is an old Marian prayer which perfectly expresses this way of thinking as it speaks of humanity 'weeping and wailing in this valley of tears'. This negative attitude towards all things of the earth and flesh was expressed not only in self-denial but in often extreme acts of punishment of the body, in what is known as self-mortification, in an effort to subdue the sinful flesh and rise above it. But as the creation story

in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis is filled with God's delight in creation - "and God saw that it was good" - we can only wonder at how this original blessing of God got so lost! Thankfully we have moved beyond this way of thinking and this kind of spirituality, and contemporary theology and spirituality now look to creation, to the magnificent and awe-inspiring universe in which we find ourselves, and indeed to our own self, as the place of the Divine Presence. And in such a theological and spiritual understanding we grow closer to God not by escaping creation but by embracing it. Our senses are no longer the 'devil's doorway', but the door to the Divine. What we need to do is awaken and be aware: "What was that you said? You have heard dozens of birds sing and seen hundreds of trees? If you look at a tree and see a tree, you have not really seen the tree. When you look at the tree and see a miracle – then, at last, you have seen! Did your heart never fill with wordless wonder when you heard a bird in song?" (Anthony De Mello)

Someone who was very influential in raising awareness of this ancient creation-centred spirituality in the eighties and nineties of the last century, is Matthew Fox. An American, and originally a Roman Catholic Dominican priest, he was expelled from the Dominican order and severely chastised, to say the least, by the then Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI). He is now an Episcopalian priest in America. Some of what Matthew Fox wrote and did was certainly controversial and this brought him into conflict with the Roman Catholic hierarchy who were keen to quash anything which seemed to threaten traditional theological perspectives. However, in his most well-known work, *Original Blessing*, Fox explores creation-centred spirituality which, in fact, goes right back to what is called the Wisdom tradition, in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the ancient Hebrew understanding of the Spirit of God, imaged as Wisdom, *Sophia*, dancing creation into being, dancing in creation. Creation-centred spirituality is also found in the Christian mystical tradition, in the theology and spirituality of such figures as Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart and of course, Francis of Assisi, amongst others. What Fox does is present the fourfold path of creation-centred spirituality: the *Via Positiva*, the *Via Negativa*, the *Via Creativa* and the *Via Transformativa*. These are all dimensions of our human experience and each is a way to God and a way of expressing God.

The *Via Creativa* is the embrace of goodness, joy, beauty and pleasure. It is about delighting in creation, opening our senses and living deeply in the knowledge that creation is blessed by God. The universe is graced and blessed, as we are too, and the path to God is to awaken to that and to rejoice in it, feel it, delight in it. The *Via Negativa* is the acknowledgement of the darkness of life. There is pain and suffering in each life and we are invited to embrace this too. We are asked to befriend the darkness and not run away from it because this is also a real dimension of our human experience. In and through our pain we will discover God, not by running away from it and denying it.

Then there is the *Via Creativa*. We are all creators. We are made in the Divine image, and to express our creativity is to give expression to God's creativity. We are co-creators with God and we are invited to indulge in this, express it and enjoy our creativity, our playfulness, our imagination. In the opening verses of his Gospel, the evangelist John uses the Greek term 'Logos', which is translated as 'Mind' or 'Word', to describe God's creation of the universe, and Fox takes these verses and renders 'Logos' as 'creative energy'. So instead of, "In the beginning was the Word", he gives us, "In the beginning was the creative energy, and the creative energy was with God and the creative energy was God. The creative energy was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the creative energy and without it not one thing came into being. What has come into being was life and the life was the light of all people". Isn't that just wonderful! It is language that really speaks to a contemporary ear. And finally there is the *Via Transformativa*, the way of justice, the way of transformation of what is broken and unjust into a place of life and goodness, justice and peace. We are all called to engage in this transformative work. We have the ability to do this, and as we do this, we bring God into our world.

So here we have a path of aliveness. As we recognize and embrace these dimensions of our humanity and give expression to them, we become fully alive and we indeed 'speak of God'. It is a spiritual path which is expressed in language and ideas understandable and relevant to our contemporary world. I can't help thinking it is very Ignatian actually, 'finding God in all things'. "Ever since God created the world", says St Paul in his letter to the Romans, "God's everlasting power and deity – however invisible – have been there for the mind to see in the things God has made". Eckhart Tolle in his book, *The Power of Now*, says, "It is right here and now, in the flesh and blood of the moment that we become alive. You don't have to be in a certain place or even a perfect person to experience the fullness of God. God is always given, incarnate in every moment and present to those who know how to be present themselves". And, says the spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, quoting one of his friends, "God comes to us disguised as our life". This is so simple that it is often missed!

In his wonderful story, *The Little Prince*, Antoine De Sainte-Exupery tells of the little prince's encounter with an inventor who had invented a pill to take away thirst. He had calculated that one could save sixty-three minutes a week by not having to drink, but the little prince, with his characteristic, wistful wisdom said, "If I had sixty-three minutes I would walk very slowly to a water fountain". Being fully alive is to be aware of the infinite blessing of where we find ourselves at any given moment. It is to respond to it and engage with it as fully as we can. The temptation, however, is to equate aliveness with measurable achievement and productivity. Often this is expressed by people with almost a sense of pride in how much they do, how full and busy their days are and how much they fit in, how much they 'party', how much they 'juggle'. This can often be held up and admired as a sign of a full life, but in fact it can mean the

very opposite. It can mean that we are so busy flitting from one activity to the next that we have in fact 'fallen asleep' – we are asleep to the beauty and wonder of each moment. There is a Buddhist saying, "When you chop wood, chop wood". That is what it means to be enlightened, to be fully present to the reality of the moment, fully engaged in it, aware of its richness.

Sometimes being alive to the present moment means silence and stillness, and this may mean seeking out moments of solitude as well as cultivating an interior silence which invites revelation; sometimes it means hard work and attention to the detail of doing what we have to; sometimes it means listening or creating or doing justice, speaking out, challenging and living with the consequences of that; sometimes it means acknowledging our weaknesses or limitations, naming our fears and not running away from them; it may mean suffering; sometimes it may mean exhilaration and exuberance; sometimes it may also mean self-sacrifice and even, yes, the asceticism of discipline or self-denial; sometimes it may mean drawing deeply on our inner resources, on perhaps forgotten strengths and resilience and wisdom; at times it may mean spontaneous acts of generosity and compassion and at other times it may require a long process of reflection as we discern our attitudes and actions and choose to follow the right path, the morally better path, even in the face of a culture which screams otherwise at us.

To be alive means seeing our personal, little story against a larger horizon and being empowered and enlivened by that. I do think that one of the ways we can fall asleep is to see ourselves as the measure of all things. To become excessively caught up in our own little story will see our world narrow. To see ourselves as part of a greater story will mean taking risks – daring to trust that there is more to existence than I can reasonably conclude, and awakening to that each day and plunging right in.

For Christians that greater story of which we are a part is that of the Incarnation: it is the story which tells us that matter and spirit are not separate, that divinity and humanity embrace. Jesus has revealed to us that what we might think of as two separate realities, the body and the spirit, are in fact one. The opposite understanding, what we call dualism, the body – spirit divide, has also been a prominent part of philosophical and theological traditions, but in light of our core understanding and belief in the Incarnation, we can only wonder at some strands of Christian theology losing sight of what this means for all of us, for our world. But do we really dare to believe what Jesus has revealed to us? And not only believe it, but give our heart to it, trust it and embrace it? We are called to be imitators of the One who shows us the way. We are called to break out of well worn, accepted patterns of thought and behavior. We are called to dare to live this story, to risk being vulnerable and 'foolish' as Jesus did when he let his radical acceptance of it take him to the cross.

To be fully alive, to 'bloom', will mean that we may need to make some changes. What might it be that we need to 'put away', as St Paul says? In his letter to the Ephesians he gets right to the point and names all those things that get in the way of the kind of life we must lead, and he exhorts them, and us, to live as children of Light for, he says, the fruit of the Light is found in all that is good and right and true. Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians to lead lives worthy of what they have been called to, is exhilarating and enlivening, for he presents the picture of someone who is indeed fully alive and whose humanity is indeed the place of divinity. "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you"! The here and now matters, the detail of our lives matters, for it is where and how we can respond to Francis' summons to the almond tree, "Speak to me of God"!

Every day we witness both 'aliveness' and 'sleep' in our world. We see outpourings of grief and rage in response to acts of atrocity or to the cruel treatment of refugees. We see disbelief in the face of the extent some people go to in order to oppress and abuse their brothers and sisters. The tears and the indescribable sadness we feel are the signs of a humanity awake to life, awake to compassion, awake to the dignity of each person and the utter unacceptability of the disregard for human life we are witnessing. The coldness of heart that we see too is the sign of a humanity that has fallen asleep, that has become diminished and has lost its own identity. The moments of aliveness are indeed sacramental. In people of all creeds and none, calling for justice and compassion, God is present. In the outrage, the sadness, the call to action, the passionate conviction that we can do better than we are doing right now, that we *must* do better, that we will not tolerate the inhumanity and indeed the evil of those who continue to be asleep to the humanity of those people they marginalize, objectify and demean, God is there.

It brings little consolation of course, but it is a fact that this is the age-old story of humanity. There is light and darkness in each of us. Just how much light or darkness will depend on our choices. And that was recognized long ago! In the first few chapters of the Book of Genesis we find this tension between good and evil, light and darkness, a full humanity and a diminished humanity. Made in God's image, alive through the power of God's 'breath', we also miss the mark, we fall, and we, the bearers of God's life and goodness, become places of darkness. There are many paths to follow which ensure that we live in the light and that we remain awake to life in its fullness, and for those of us who are Christian, it is the Way of Jesus. And as we know, this is the Way of love. Uncalculated, unmeasured, absurdly generous and radical love!

So this week, let's take to heart this fabulous challenge from the seventeenth century: "Start blooming frozen Christian", the mystic Angelus Silesius called out, "Springtime is at hand. When will you ever bloom if not here and now"?

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