

God is known – in a flash of vision which opens a door to Eternity

The following story is taken from a little collection called *in a flash of vision*, written by Sr Ishpriya. Sr Ishpriya is an English Catholic Sacred Heart sister who, many years ago, went to live in India and there lives out her religious vocation, drawing on the practices and insights of the Indian spiritual traditions which enhance and deepen her living of her own Catholic Christian tradition. This is a beautifully poignant account of something which touched her deeply and which, in its tenderness and simplicity, most surely gives us a glimpse of Eternity.

“The early morning express train from Pune to Bombay pulled into the station at Lonavala. The tension and tiredness etched on the faces of the daily commuters to the city, seemed to incite the frenzied activity of the coolies and the chai-walas making their uneven ways among the jostling crowds on the platform.

My unseeing gaze slid over the familiar scene to be unexpectedly arrested by a small mound of sacks piled in the angle between two walls. As I watched, the gentle fingers of the newly risen sun reached and caressed the little heap. In spontaneous response it rose to greet the dawn. One joyous bound and, a small boy had leapt to his feet.

His smile laughed back to the sun as he stretched his cramped body to its warmth. Turning, he reverently retrieved the scattered sacks. Each was folded with exquisite care and placed on top of the torn cardboard box which served as home. A broken umbrella and a battered lota were then carefully replaced in position. His total possessions thus lovingly set in order, he once more stretched his arms to greet another day, face radiant with the joy of being alive.

He seemed in no hurry to begin his every day task of finding, somehow, enough food to sustain this fragile, precious, gift of life. Time was his. He looked at the train, bulging with anxious passengers, without anxiety. Only slowly did he begin to move towards the nearest compartment. But the train was late and as he approached the first window with the beggars’ universal gesture of appeal, it pulled away from the platform.

We rushed on towards the city, our duties and our deadlines, while I held quietly in my heart the love a small boy had unknowingly awakened there. Surely never had newborn baby been more tenderly enfolded in its mother’s arms, than had those dirty sacks been folded by that child. Never had saint risen from sleep to pray with more spontaneous joy than that small boy rose from a homeless night to a hungry day.

It is almost certain that he knew neither religious creed nor spiritual practice, but can we doubt that he and God were friends?”

This simple scene, possibly unnoticed by many, has the power to awaken something within us. For me it is the tenderness of joy. Joy, properly understood, is a tender thing. It is not excitement or euphoria, there is nothing loud or brash about it, rather I find joy to be aligned with trust, with openness - something of a quiet 'inner smile'. It has a vulnerability which comes from baring our soul, allowing ourselves to be touched and awakened. Speaking of 'the little heap', the small boy enveloped in the sacks which had served as home and sleeping place for the night, Ishpriya says, "In spontaneous response it rose to greet the dawn". How beautiful that is. His rising and his joyous bound were a response, a response drawn forth by the dawn.

I like to think of all life - and indeed my own life - in this way, as being drawn forth. One of the most beautiful descriptions of spirituality is that it is 'responding to the touch of God'. In this there is openness and receptivity and there is movement. Like the dawn casting its light and warmth over the little sleeping boy we may come to see our life as an awakening by God. This is a tender thing for it is drawn forth from us - not driven, coercive or willful. There are so many ways that this response might be awakened in us as the eternal and gracious self-giving of God envelops us, soaks into us: in the exquisite beauty of music, in the soft light falling through the trees, in the sound of waves breaking on the shore, in a word of compassion gently spoken, in words of inspiration, in forgiveness and in hope which opens us to possibility, to vistas beyond the moment, in prayer. God is in all - All in all - and God's offer is to ever awaken us to God's touch.

Too often sadly, and the history of religion testifies to this, we have made of religion little more than a list of 'dos and don'ts', demanding rules to be obeyed and against which to measure ourselves, our progress and our worth. Too often we have forgotten that God at work in our lives is best understood as invitation, gift freely given to which we may respond. Scripture is invitational - it invites us into a vision of life and of ourselves that, if we respond and rise, will indeed take us into life in its fullness. When we look at Jesus' interactions with the people of his day we see this invitation: 'Come and see', 'come follow me', 'let all who have ears to hear, listen'. There are a few stories of Jesus restoring life to people. To the little girl who had died, Jairus' daughter, he said, "talitha cumi", 'little girl rise'. To Lazarus in the tomb he said, "come forth". If we take these stories as metaphors for our own lives we see that the invitation is always to rise up from decay, from what is deadening and life-denying, from what is lacklustre and dull within us. We are called forth, invited to emerge. "Let what you have said be done to me", said Mary to the angel. Let your words work on me and in me and shape me into something of life. The angel's words drew forth a response from Mary and this response created the space, the moment, for holiness to be conceived and to grow within, a holiness she gave birth to in Jesus.

Catherine of Genoa, a Saint in the Church, who was born in 1447 spoke these beautiful words: "In this world, the rays of God's love, unbeknownst to man, encircle man all about, hungrily seeking to penetrate him". That was way back in the fifteenth century, yet these words are still able to speak to us, and indeed about us, today. Many of the great mystics in our Tradition lived and wrote in a time and place very different from our own and their words and thoughts

are a product of their time and place and of the religious and philosophical worldview of their day. Yet there is also that which is timeless and universal about them. And so it is with Catherine's words and her story.

As was often the case in the world of the late Middle Ages, Catherine's religious awareness developed at an early age and by the time she was thirteen she felt drawn to the life of a nun. However, her request was turned down because of her youth and three years later she was married off to a young Genoese nobleman. Catherine endured a miserable marriage to a man who turned out to be a philanderer, first of all bearing her misery with resignation and then seeking distraction and consolation in society. In 1473 she experienced a profound and life-changing spiritual experience. In this experience she became overwhelmingly aware of her own sins and faults, seeing these in the light of God's boundless love. This mystical experience was the foundation upon which Catherine built the rest of her life. She devoted herself to sharing this love with the sick at Genoa's hospital. Her husband too, experienced a spiritual conversion, and he worked alongside Catherine in the hospital.

After her profound spiritual experience Catherine's whole life was filled with this awareness of the Divine Presence, so much so, that absolutely nothing could distract her from this. She felt and knew God's love firsthand. But Catherine also knew the struggle of the human will to let go and to surrender to God and she also clearly understood that the mystical consciousness she experienced was a process directed by God, a process she referred to as purification. The more one is exposed to Divine Love, the more one's sinfulness is 'burned away' by this Love, she said. And the end of this is a joy-filled state of being in God's presence without any impediment of sin.

Catherine proclaimed that her own experience of Divine Love was potentially open to everyone. And indeed it is. *In this world, the rays of God's love, unbeknownst to us, encircle us all about, hungrily seeking to penetrate us.* Her words are timeless. They echo that great utterance by St Paul two thousand years ago: *"It is in Christ that we live and move and have our being"*. They are equally the words of twentieth and twenty-first century religious language. They are very much at home with the thinking of the great twentieth century Jesuit theologian and scientist, Teilhard de Chardin, who speaks of the universe as the divine milieu, the place of the Divine Presence. In his work, *The Divine Milieu*, his concern is to teach his readers how to see. His thought expresses a love for nature, a delight in scientific discoveries, a rejoicing in human progress and an underlying trust in a benevolent universe evolving in the unconditional love of a benevolent and all-forgiving God. God is the atmosphere, the environment, the divine milieu in which we spend our lives. True vision is a gift which enables us to pay attention to the world.

Catherine's words, as do Paul's and Teilhard's and indeed Ishpriya's story of the little beggar boy, invite us to see the reality of our cosmos as graced and blessed. Mystical experience or consciousness is simply living in and knowing this reality. It is not only for a privileged few, it is for everyone. But Catherine's words about the need for purification are equally as important. We all need, constantly, to be purified, because so much else clutters our awareness. This might simply be through preoccupation, busy-ness or deliberate choice or simply through living in a world which is always offering something new it says we need. Purification then is that choice to simply allow ourselves to be drawn to another awareness and to be inspired, shaped and formed by it, day by day.

Let it draw forth a response from us. Let us not let that invitation pass us by! That blessed moment of mystical awareness and insight can be right now. May it draw us in.

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