

2009 Sabbatical

I am very grateful to the Diocese of Southwark and Sion College for the support which I have received towards my sabbatical leave from mid-May to the end of August this year. This was a precious time, like an interval coming at just the right moment in a lengthy production: a welcome chance to stretch your legs, mull over the action so far and enjoy some refreshment! I had worried that my plans were too piecemeal, but a pattern emerged: rooted in half-formed resolutions to visit places which had stirred my imagination and to explore themes which had caught my attention.

Now there was time: to pray, ideally in some kind of community setting, possibly involving some ways of praying which were new to me; to be with my recently bereaved mother; to learn about Celtic Christianity (Was there ever such a thing and why does it fascinate so many?); and to travel outside my customary orbit to encounter an ancient people's religious practice, under threat, but continued and sustained, offering identity and purpose against the odds. I also wanted time to be an ordinary householder, attending to this and that, cooking meals uninterrupted by meetings.

I began with a course on the Enneagram at Sheldon (Mary and Martha) in Devon, led by Karen Webb. I visited the island of Iona and lived in community at the MacLeod Centre (sleeping in a dormitory!), studying Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship* with John Bell. I travelled to North Wales and St Beuno's Ignatian Spirituality Centre for an 8-day Individually Guided Retreat, with Sister Bonaventura Kim from Korea, who encouraged me to paint. I went away with my mother to Cornwall and Sussex, where the sun shone on us nearly every day. I returned to North Wales and St Deiniol's Library for a course on Celtic Christianity. I whiled away the evenings reading about William Gladstone. I had previously known little about the great man, but he is a tangible presence in Hawarden. I was left rather awestruck, not least by how many books he had managed to read while being Prime Minister four times and by his selfless commitment to home rule for Ireland. At the end of July I visited China and (most memorably) Tibet. In my final two weeks before returning to work I busied myself happily, gardening and pottering domestically, doing some reading, including the Rule of St Benedict and Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Benjamin Britten, with some of his music as an accompaniment.

I was pleased to have started with the Enneagram. Originating in Sufi mysticism, numerology and geometric progressions (which I do not begin to understand!), the Enneagram offers an evocative, differentiated vocabulary for describing an individual's sense of themselves. There were some similarities with Myers-Briggs, but there was more scope and colour, as well as an explicit emphasis on the need to have some kind of spiritual practice. Everyone in the group was energised by recognising themselves in one of the nine types. In contrast, churches have tended to adopt a rather more "one size fits all" model for their services, structures and institutional life, even in pastoral care, although in some places this is changing. Spiritualities are now freely chosen and not inherited. In his book *Spirituality and Theology* Philip Sheldrake says: 'The question at the forefront of most of the great spiritual classics used to be "What or who is God?" Nowadays the characteristic question of the contemporary spiritual seeker is more likely to be "Who am I?"' The juxtaposition of these two questions, as if they don't mesh together, encapsulates the problem. The institutional Church is often portrayed (fairly *and* unfairly) as preoccupied with its own doctrinal and moral agendas, leaving the 'contemporary spiritual seeker' disconnected, wary or simply bored.

Of course, it is a false dichotomy. Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises (Exx 48) recommended that the one who prayed should ask 'for what I want and desire'. It is the profoundest insight, too rarely heard, that our truest desire is God's truest desire for us. Mother Julian wrote similarly: 'And I saw very certainly that we must necessarily be in longing and in penance until the time when we are led so deeply into God that we verily and truly know our own soul'. (Chapter 56 *The Showings*). The Celtic saints believed that we are in God, that nothing and no-one is outside God. Around the corner from where I am writing this, in the window of a card shop, is a poster that declares "Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself". The secular Chinese authorities, busy creating a new regime in Tibet, might well agree. However, the thousands of Tibetan pilgrims who throng their temple in Lhasa manifest with restrained eloquence that faith cannot be excised quite so easily, however redundant or simply inconvenient such faithfulness may seem to some.

Stephen Roberts 02.09.09