

Ballyvaloo

19 August 2021

Welcome

It is very easy to be overwhelmed by anxiety. There is plenty to be worried about. To make a cheering list. Taking the big picture, the future of humanity, in terms of ecology, human rights and democracy; the future of the faith, in an antagonistic culture and our own failure to pass on the faith. Much more concretely, there are real concerns in religious orders about ageing, properties and finance. Within our circles of friends and family, there can be loss and bereavement of exceptional intensity. One of our priests used to change the prayer about anxiety to "save us from all needless" anxiety, on the didactic point that some of it was good for you, so it wouldn't be right to be spared all anxiety. It can be hard to tell the needless from the needed!!!

Topic

There is help from our friend St Paul, both in today's reading and tomorrow's continuation.

Steps

The triangle I mentioned yesterday is a good guide. If asked where is the best teaching on prayer, the Holy Spirit and joy in the New Testament, I would unhesitatingly reply in Paul, Luke-Acts and in John.

The place to start is my own experience, as a person of prayer. Looking back across the years, what has my experience and my history of prayer been? Where there significant moments of insight, when something "shifted" for me, a learning? How am I, as a person of prayer, in the present moment? What do I actually do to keep the Gospel alive in my life? Keep in mind that prayer cannot be assessed by how I feel during it, but rather by my changed way of living, my on-going conversion of heart and life. Prayer is a hunger. In one sense, it is a waste of time. Prayer is at the same time utterly essential. By prayer, I mean some rising above the mere saying of prayers, leading to some kind of quiet prayer, centering prayer, meditation, the prayer of presence.

Everything in the Christian project is a gift, a grace. This is true of prayer as well. We do not "generate" the spiritual life in ourselves. Instead, the Spirit is already praying within out. All we have to do is attune ourselves to the Spirit within, assenting to interior liturgy, saying a profound "yes". I say "all we have to do", but as we all know, it calls for consistence and dedication. The intensity of Paul's own engagement sets the bar for us.

His great teaching on prayer is that we are not alone. The best teaching is in Romans 8. I'll cite two passages.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how we should pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings.

And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes on behalf of the saints according to God's will. (Romans 8:26-27)

That great chapter ends with a kind of hymn. Here are the last lines:

No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor heavenly rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:37-39)

This is utterly real for Paul and spills over in real joy.

The joy that we find in St Paul is not simply the result of a happy disposition, a naturally upbeat personality. Once again, it is a gift. Paul believes absolutely in the faithfulness of God, in Jesus's death and resurrection and in the outpouring of the Spirit. In a striking text in 2 Corinthians, he puts it like this:

But as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the one who was proclaimed among you by us—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but it has always been "Yes" in him. For every one of God's promises are "Yes" in him; therefore also through him the "Amen" is spoken, to the glory we give to God. But it is God who establishes us together with you in Christ and who anointed us, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a down payment. (2Corinthians 1:18-22)

As result, Paul is free to be both joyful and fully engaged. We will see more of this tomorrow. All is gift: prayer, Holy Spirit and joy/

Conclusion

There are lessons for us today. Paul is free to be joyful and to care deeply. The joy is always deeper than the "issues" coming at him. Of course there is anxiety! If our engagement is not to be warped by the "cares of the world", we need a different source of calm. Then, in the good sense, we can be indifferent, free and objective in our projects. Then the peace of God and the God of peace will be with us.