

Link to simple act of worship for Sunday 26th July – Trinity 7 - https://youtu.be/onb56C_UIpw

Last week, if you recall, I observed how particular passages of scripture can trigger memories of times or situations in which you may have heard them. Now don't worry, this is not going to happen every week but the passage appointed to be read from Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, and in particular his observation:

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. *Romans 8:28*

triggered memories for me.

I go back to the period shortly after Anthony was born just over 40 years ago. It was coming up to Christmas and earlier in the year I had accepted an invitation to act as a sort of MC for a carol service in the old YWCA in Sandymount; I wasn't preaching, I was simply to act as a link man. Following Anthony's birth it was going to prove quite awkward to do this. So, since it did not involve getting someone to preach at short notice, I rang and asked could they arrange for someone else to take my place. I was told, no that would not be possible.

So, on the night in question, I set out in slightly bad grace. As I drew closer to the YW a dense fog came down and, to cut a long story short, as I was parking I clipped the walls of St John's Church, Sandymount, damaging the front wing of my recently acquired Renault 4.

Slightly shaken, I walked into the YW, explained what had happened and asked for a chance to settle my nerves. It was at this point that an earnest

young man assured me; ‘Everything works for the good for those who love the Lord.’

He was right of course – but that is not what I wanted to hear at that particular time – nor in fact what I needed to hear. What I needed at that time was just a bit of TLC to enable to go ahead with the carol service. Looking back, I recall a member of Raheny Parish being there and helping me check the car so that I could drive home safely and helping me to get it fixed later. Up to then I had not been sure of him and he had not been sure of me – we got to know each other better through that. So, something good did come out of that miserable experience.

But did God set that up so that I could get to know Bill better? No – it was Kevin Brew who crashed the car that night, not God.

I have never been comfortable with the idea of a God who inflicts suffering or natural disasters on his creation. Sometimes it can look that way but that whole idea doesn’t sit easily with me. Bad things do happen in this broken and hurting world. Loved ones do fall sick, injustices do happen. I often think back to something Jean Vanier said in reply to someone who asked him why God allowed people to die of hunger. He said that they were asking the wrong question. ‘Don’t ask why does God allow people to die of hunger; ask instead why does God allow the rich not to share.’

As years go by, I find myself believing less and less in a God who arbitrarily fixes things from on high; and more and more in a God who is present in this

world; a God who inspires and enables those who take a stand against injustice to remain strong; one who calls those who are indifferent to suffering and challenges their indifference; a God who inspires and enables those who work in places of suffering and pain, our hospitals and nursing homes. Over the years I have come to recognise a God who stands alongside me in my pain, who walks the road with me, who listens to me, who understands me when I don't even understand myself, who enables me to grow into the person he intends me to be.

Since the beginning of the year, we as a society have faced a crisis in Covid 19 that we never even imagined this time last year. We can blame God, we can blame China, the carelessness of those in authority who should have seen warning signs but in truth pandemics have happened in the past and they will happen again. So what can we learn as individuals, as a society from this crisis that has befallen us?

With the lockdown, closure of our schools and workplaces, pubs and restaurants along with restrictions on travel and on shopping, as a society we have had to slow down, spend more time with each other, learn a simpler way of living. This has not been a universally positive experience. For those living alone, for those affected by domestic violence, for parent and children with special needs, for those involved in the travel and hospitality sector this period has presented particular, in some cases life threatening, challenges.

What particular lessons have I learned from this period. I have learned new skills, the possibilities opened up by working online. At our Vestry meeting

the other night we were joined by members in Cork and in the West! Up to now producing items for YouTube was a total mystery. Having been cut off from grandchildren for several months, I've been reminded of the value of simple presence with ones we love. As a society we had become very critical of those who provided services for us. We have learned the crucial role played by our health workers, our teachers, those who have kept our supply lines working in our shops and supermarkets, those who empty our bins. I've been reminded of the simple joy of gathering together for worship in our Church.

As we emerge from these very strange times, it is my hope and earnest prayer that God will keep in our hearts and minds the lessons of the value of time, of presence with each other, the importance of gratitude for life, for each other. Just as I do not believe that God crashed my car that winter's night some 40 years ago, I do not believe that God brought this upon us. Just as I came to see Bill in a different light in the wake of that crash, so I do believe that God has valuable lessons to teach us about life, about priorities in the times that lie ahead. So that we can in truth say:

'Everything works for the good for those who love the Lord.'