

***Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,***

***And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!***

Those two lines complete what was, for a long time, Britain's favourite poem according to BBC polls. It may still be number one although I suspect, understandably enough, that the passage of time and revisionist views both of colonialism and gender equality may have relegated it to a lower place. The poem is, of course, "**IF**" by Rudyard Kipling and its opening lines are even better known than those which close the work.

***If you can keep your head when all about you***

***Are losing theirs and blaming it on you, ---***

Leave aside the colonial associations of Kipling and the masculine tone, which reaches its crescendo in the final line, and there is still much of value in this poem, speaking at it does of virtues which remain laudable – indeed essential. Fundamentally, the poem speaks of a state of being which is anchored much more deeply than in the shifting sands of race, position, fame or fortune. Whereas Kipling includes no overt Christian reference within his lyric, it is difficult to believe that his education and upbringing were not formed from the same Victorian Christian ethic which inspired his contemporary, Priscilla Owens (1829–1907) to write the hymn "**Will your anchor hold in the storms of life**".

Shifting to a very different genre --- I have recently rediscovered the delights of the works of Jill Murphy. Some of you will be familiar with "**Five minutes peace!**" and "**Peace at last**", imaginatively illustrated and cleverly compiled books for young children. In "Five Minutes Peace", Mrs Large, an elephant and mother of three longs for a quiet bath and a read of the paper; respite from domestic chaos. Instead, she finds herself constantly interrupted and, eventually, sharing the bath with her loud and playful offspring. That which is highly amusing to a child also speaks cleverly to the longing every busy adult has for some peace and quiet. I heard Dorothy reading one of Jill Murphy's books to Sofia earlier this week and that image came immediately to mind when I began to prepare for today using the two readings we have shared.

In the Exodus reading it is the very antithesis of inner peace which afflicts the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai. Out in the wilderness [which is, of course symbolic of their spiritual condition] the erstwhile slaves of the Pharaoh, are becoming increasingly anxious. Moses has been up the mountain for a long time – lost to them in the mists --- and as the time grows ever longer the people begin to assume that Moses and his God are lost to them. They bring their anxiety to Aaron, who in the face of crisis turns aside from the new religion into which God has been inducting them, reverting to older pagan ways as he gathers all the gold and melts it down to make an idol in the shape of a calf --- perhaps a reference to Canaanite or Egyptian deities.

The Exodus narrative reads very critically of this action – for very understandable reasons --- but from our perspective we need not judge so critically. Reverting to old ways in the face of crisis or pressure is something we all do. Every golfer among you will know that the natural slice which affects many of us is most likely to raise its ugly head when the pressure is on and we all know the importance of the teaching and the practice which in a whole range of life situations helps us to keep natural anxiety and panic at bay and a cool head in control. All such teaching tries to anchor us in a deeper place so that we are not blown off course by the stormy circumstances of the moment.

Many years ago, I was going through a period of uncertainty and consequent anxiety. My sister sent me a card to say she was praying for me and in the card, she quoted the Apostle Paul writing to the Philippians: ***Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***

Over the years, as I have learned more of Christian spirituality and practice and as I have observed the explosion of interest in techniques such as mindfulness [an explosion of interest caused by the significant increase in the incidence of stress and anxiety] so I have come to recognise that whereas Christian spirituality does not have the monopoly upon related

wisdom it most certainly has a grasp upon some fundamental truths concerning anxiety. For a start --- there is a rich strand in Christian spirituality which encourages us to count our blessings. It is there very strongly in Ignatian spirituality which seeks to help us to live in a way where we notice the blessings around us and appreciate them gratefully. It is there, of course, in the parable of the two housebuilders which highlights the importance of firm foundations when the storm of life rage around us. Both these things come through in Paul's teaching to the Philippians and that teaching points towards the peace of God which passes all understanding; a peace that is so entirely unconnected to immediate circumstances that it can seem naïve and irrational. Of course, it is irrational, it goes beyond reason to a deeper spiritual place.

Nowhere is this peace which passes all understanding more evident, than in the accounts of Jesus before his accusers and during his torture and death. Pilate – who represents worldly power and wisdom --cannot understand it. Jesus looks square in the eye of all the pain and disgrace which the world was throwing upon him and he focuses his heart and mind upon the blessings and the grace of God. Paul might be describing just that when he says in verse 8: ***Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.***

Jesus was the very incarnation of that and from that came resurrection life and the peace which passes all understanding. Paul understood that very well and hence he was able to write to the Romans these stirring words with which I will finish: ***Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ---- No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

To Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and thanksgiving, time without end. Amen