

Trinity 16, Harvest/Legacy Sunday, Matins
John 6:25-35, Revelation 14:14-18
Father Christopher

St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey have just started a lecture series on contemplation in the city, and over lunch on Thursday I listened to Rowan Williams give the first, on a figure I hadn't heard of before: a French social worker of the 1940s and 50s, called Madeleine Delbrel. She spent time serving ordinary people in the streets and wrote about applying the lessons of monasticism to everyday life. She spoke for example about finding silence while walking in the street; not literal silence, but interior silence - silence for contemplation in the midst of busyness all around you. And about how to treat those parts of our life which seem like distractions as opportunities to draw closer to God. She wrote, for example, about trying to see even being woken by your child in the middle of the night as being like being woken by the monastery bell calling you to a night office – a calling to serve another in love, rather than simply as a disturbance of your sleep.

That struck me as being rather beautiful, but it may strike those of you who are parents as being a touch too romantic.

Key to her approach however was an attempted shift in perspective, to see the Christian life in a more positive and active light than all being abstinence and sacrifice. She advised, for example, that instead of trying to be silent in prayer, we might simply try listening.

As we celebrate the harvest, as well as marking Legacy Sunday, as in both we give thanks for our plenty, and seek to give back to God some of what He has given us in His generosity, there was one phrase of hers which struck me as being particularly acute, and apt for today.
'Silence leads us to make a gift of self, rather than a selfishness that has been gift-wrapped.'

When I heard this phrase I felt its cut. How many of us in our giving, or in our helping of others, expect gratitude in return, or do so with a sense of pride at our generosity; or give ourselves a pat on the back for being more charitable than our neighbour? Or even want to exercise control over others by directing their use of our gift?

You may think this too harsh a judgment. Surely if we are giving at all, that is to be celebrated – the result is after all the same? And you'd be right, to a degree. But the Christian life - the Christian pilgrimage - is one of seeking to conform ourselves, and to be conformed, ever more closely to the way of Christ. For that reason, whatever the result for those we help, we also have a duty to think on our inner life – what is going on in our heart.

There is a great play going on in Jesus's words from John's gospel which we heard earlier.

'Ye seek me ... because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life.'

The people have indeed sought Him because He fed them, in the feeding of the 5,000. Who can blame them? And He chose to feed them with normal bread because He saw that they were hungry. Jesus does not ignore our real, material needs, and nor should we ignore those needs, or those of others. But in His providing for those needs we also see His giving of His very self, on the Cross, and in the Eucharist.

Why, in Madeleine Delbrel's words does silence lead to the giving of self, rather than gift-wrapped selfishness? I think it is because if our material giving comes from a place of prayer, it comes from the right perspective. It then comes not as just another task, yet another use of our material *stuff*,

another transaction. It instead comes from a place of contemplation – contemplation of God and of our brother or sister in need.

In that contemplation, that silence, we see more truly that all that we have is of God, rather than of ourselves. We see through any self-created outer layer of insecure superiority. Just as we see the other as also being of God, and in their need as being as entitled to dignity, attention and love as ourselves.

You may be wondering what this has to do with legacies, or giving to the church.

Some of our money as a church does indeed go to those in need, something I have been pushing for particularly since arriving here – some in direct charitable work or donations; and some to the diocese, and as a result to support poorer parishes which cannot afford to pay all of their own costs. And that is right.

We are **all** the Church, as the people of God. In giving to the Church, it is in my view a fundamental principle that we give of our plenty, in celebration of all that is good in our life, back to **Him**. We do not give to an abstract body, for the Vicar to do what she likes with, in return for whatever we feel we get out of it. We are **all** the Church, expressing ourselves **together**, in how we use our resources as well as what we do when we come together in worship.

In playing our full part in the Body of Christ, as His hands and His feet in this place, we cannot therefore do so as gift-wrapped selfishness, because none of what we do as a Church is done alone. Instead we give of ourselves – not in our own strength, but God's; and not on our own, but as one child of God among many.

I have still not said very much about legacies, but suffice it to say that it is in our final gifts, as all that has been ours on this earth – all that has been placed into our hands and passed through them - is finally dispersed, that we offer our final charitable acts.

It seems rather macabre to have our reading from Revelation, speaking of the reaper, thrusting in his sharp sickle. But more than harvesting what remains of our earthly goods, when we die what is most important is that we express our love, our giving of self, in place of selfishness gift-wrapped. And it is for all of us to consider what we would like our last acts to express about what matters most to us, even if those last acts are written down 20, 30 or 40 years before that time finally comes.

Rather than being an unpleasant duty, to pray about our final gifts, our final handing over of what moth and rust doth corrupt, in the words of the Prayer Book, is instead a very beautiful thing – our duty and our joy. Amen