

Friendship is a little easier now, without masks – allowing for all the intricacies of human communication, mostly non-verbal: opening the door to strangers, offering them a cup of tea, letting them enjoy the garden. We had a visit yesterday from parishioners of All Saints in Queens Park, Bedford, visiting All Saints in Turvey and wanting to see us too, into the bargain. Apprehension quickly gave way to joy – the joy of discovering so many things in common. Firstly, the birds, the last of the Swifts overhead, and a family of Grey Wagtails on the path to the stream, and talk of birdsong and how in Autumn it changes: Robins sing differently, now, as Cuckoos do in June. And then the wonder of the garden with potatoes and beans and courgettes – you need to pick these, now – minutes from the plate. And so much beetroot that we are happy to give some away. And as to tea and chat and other corrections made; one of the gardeners worships at All Saints but neither we nor they had known it; one of the psychologists is known to the wife of a Quaker through her mother – and so on. We say goodbye on the doorstep and more connections emerge: we remember you at the Bunyan Meeting House and so and so is also a regular here, indeed, she's in the village, now, talking to so and so. And religion – where does that come into it? Well, it was mentioned, at times, but comes a poor second to the real communication that was going on: Christ enfleshed in one another, not following any programme except to be human – and not even that as a conscious target. 'Transparency' 'Rising from the dead' 'Real Presence' – there it all was going on at the most mundane of levels – indeed, where else but there could it go on?

And many of the people of Jesus' day suffer, just like us, from not realising this: complaining to each about Jesus because he had said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' 'Surely, this is Jesus, son of Joseph,' they said. 'We know his father and mother. How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'' What they fail to realise is that they too have 'come down from heaven'; that there is a level at which we all meet as equals and which cannot be gainsaid. Or, in the words of Dom Lawrence Freeman:

God, as Aelred of Rievaulx bravely said, is not only love, God is friendship, with oneself, others and the environment. Those who are not in friendship can know nothing about God. In the cruel certainties of the religious bigot defending God against his enemies this friendship has been forgotten. The anxious homelessness of our fragmented society has engendered a contemplative homing instinct even deeper than fundamentalism. In a place like this (referring to Monte Oliveto in Tuscany) the homing instinct for God intensifies in the presence of human warmth, tolerance, hospitality and a more gentle kind of religion.(Beauty's Field p.11)

And, I would add, the alternative is, ultimately, to crucify the other.

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