

Many years ago we were having issues over our gas bill because we kept getting estimated readings instead of readings confirmed by the meter reader who was still faithfully recording them but, because of the site's chequered past, was not able to assign them to correct addresses – or so we eventually worked out. One of the addresses was to Ivern House which was actually up the High Street several hundred yards away – and so on. I explained to the lovely lady at the other end of the line that I was getting really upset about this because it had gone on for so long and she replied in a distinct North-Eastern accent, 'Well, if you, as a monk, are getting anxious what hope is there for the rest of us?' which, of course, both amused and reassured me but also made me think, so what are monks for: to unsettle or reassure other people? For monastic life is often seen as a prophetic challenge to the way the rest of the world lives but here, in this instance, it seems to have been understood, not so much as a challenge, but as a prophetic reassurance: here are people who know how to truly live at peace with God, with themselves, and implicitly, perhaps, with the world and this gives the rest of us, the world, hope. This makes sense if we translate it, instead, in terms of love: love is a challenge to all concerned, but also reassuring:

This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you.

No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.. which is the challenge

and

I call you friends.. which is the reassurance.

Friendship implies a certain mutuality and understanding but it has a cost. We enjoy one another's company and support but also endure one another's concerns and weaknesses. We take on board each other's pain as well as joy and so, perhaps, what the lady on the phone was implying was not only a monk's separateness as a challenge to the world, but as a way of loving the world all the more. Christ dies *for us* – *for all of us*, indeed, for the whole of creation. This idea can then, in its turn, become a cause for concern – 'My God, I'm not only responsible for me but for the whole world!' – until one realises that none of this makes sense unless we truly are 'in Christ' and it's not our doing after all.

*No, you did not choose me, I chose you
and I commissioned you*

which can also be read as 'I enabled you to go out and bear fruit' and we hear that tension in Paul's letter to the Philippians. In one line we hear,

now that I am absent, work out your salvation in fear and trembling

But in the next line we hear

It is God who, for his own generous purposes, gives you the intention and power to act.

We eventually resolved the puzzle over the gas bills as God will eventually resolve all our other tensions, too – and indeed, has done, in Christ.

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