

Backfilling Br. Herbert's grave yesterday was hard work, the soil in the wheelbarrow was solid all the way through. We have at last a period of cold that matches what we think of as the pattern of winters past – as we will hear in the hymn for St Lucy on Tuesday

'The stone is cold, it's fire is locked within, 'The streams held fast until the thaw begin'

This is winter as the handmaid to spring – preparing the ground by freezing it, and all those little, and not so little, bugs that need nature's control if not to overwhelm us in the coming year – or so we think, or so we hope – along the lines of a little adversity does us good. So let's enjoy this winter period for the good it's destined to bring, unless of course you can't afford the electricity or you're fighting a war in the Ukraine or it's simply a vehicle for promoting Christmas sales. And this perhaps reflects the two edged nature of the creative impulse, that evolutionary force that necessarily advances some people and lays others low – or as Teilhard de Chardin put it – there can be no construction or creation without an equivalent destruction – so winter then as a paradigm of the gains and losses inherent in the religious quest

'The wind rung earth is stilled, its music dumb, Till fire and water to their harvest come'

And the double-edged nature of such metaphors as fire and water, winter and spring, are perhaps something of an answer to the puzzle over why John the Baptist is both the herald of the kingdom and it's first victim. Perhaps he was trying too hard. There's a salutary piece of advice from the great Anglican writer on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, to a young novice sister

'I know the fact that you loathe early rising must make it seem especially excellent discipline and something worth offering to God, but really the thing most worth offering to God is a steady well poised mind and body.... Free from strain and entirely at His disposal. And this is achieved not by getting the last devotional mile out of the car, but by discovering and sticking to it's economic speed – or always rather less than you feel in your better moments you could manage, therefore something that even in your worst moments you can manage (August 11 1960)

Evelyn Underhill was writing at a moment when the United Kingdom was staring defeat in the face, at it's most isolated after the fall of France, not at all sure that it would survive the Nazi threat and she herself was at her lowest physically, confined to quarters and soon indeed to be overcome by the asthma which always plagued her – she knew about patience, and in writing such a letter was doing what she could despite her illness

'sowing hope beyond the hope our senses bring.'

And so to James and his advice to have patience, to suffer loss as best as we can, to wait rather than to force the earth to spin more quickly, to lean towards the sun too soon.

To let God be God after all.

Br John Mayhead

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(Hymn for St Lucy, © Turvey Abbey)