

“ Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be” they say, but there is a nostalgia which remains with us forever until taken away by Christ; it’s a hunger for a time and place we have known and yet not known -for a time and place outside time and place, an ancestral home in God. We get glimpses of it through the experience of longing for physical and time- bound experiences from our past. This came home to me strongly on a recent visit home- not just to my family but to the places nearby which I’d shared with them, and particularly the places where some sort of wilderness still prevailed, or at least is still to be glimpsed. This may seem to turn the metaphor of desert exile on its head but only to emphasize that the exile we suffer isn’t about time and place after all – it’s a much deeper longing than that, and indeed to overturn the metaphor once more these places I visited recently were very wet and biting cold and teeming with life. But they’re like a meme I cannot get out of my head, not necessarily because of their richness – we’re talking birds here, and in one place hundreds of deer – but because they took me back instantly to my youth, as if the intervening fifty years had been but a day or two, a fleeting memory. This spoke to me of eternity, of time and place somehow ever present, never really gone away, no more gone away, that is, than God is from us though we usually experience it differently – more often than not as absence.

The point being that the words we are reading in these texts are metaphors for an experience that transcends time and place, so when we hear Jewish or Muslim or Christian settlers laying claim to “ the land” of Israel or Jerusalem as a biblical right we can be sure they’ve mistaken their nostalgia for God, for a nostalgia for a time and place which falls far short of God’s intention. And this is true for anything or anyone we try to hold on to in this present passing life, including all those Christmas gifts we are told will make us happy but become a means of diverting our attention from that underlying nostalgia for a time and place where time and place no longer matter.

Our time of service to this sin of deluded attachment is ended in Christ, foreshadowed here by John the Baptist, but only for another attachment to take its place – that service of love to one another which Christ embodies and which then gives all our passing attachments their true worth. So this isn’t about leaving behind present material reality but of living more deeply in it, that is in recognising and using it as gift in the service of others – so that the fire which will ultimately burn us up is not of our own making – through the violence of climate change or war – but the fire of God’s love transforming us even now through the power of his Holy Spirit. We are given the world to live and love in. As Shane MacGowan’s widow Mary Clarke so beautifully and simply put it “it’s only love that will last”. Now there’s a meme worth holding on to, or am I being unduly nostalgic?.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour