

We seem to spend the first part of our lives accumulating possessions and, if we are wise, the last part getting rid of them – what at first seemed a gain actually becomes a burden. Try getting Oxfam to take all the books you haven't read, and never will, so that others can have them and probably repeat the exercise. Churches are like that. Over the centuries they accumulate customs and traditions and become repositories of dead matter which tend to obscure rather than reveal their true meaning – which is us now in our freedom before God. In today's gospel passage Jesus famously sends out his disciples like lambs among wolves, carrying no purse, no haversacks, no sandals : hands and hearts free to receive whatever the journey offers, or rather to know when to receive and when not. They are to be open to the possibility of staying put but also to moving on. It's a dynamic vision, full of the risk that love demands, indeed unworkable without the cooperation of others. Ostensibly they are preparing the ground for Jesus but in a very real sense he is preparing the ground for them – they are learning his way of walking the earth, with nowhere to lay their heads until provided for by others who are prepared in their turn to run the risk of love, who are already in a sense then already prepared by Christ. We think we take the Church to others only to find that Christ is already there waiting for us to catch up. Hence the surprise perhaps of these first disciples that “*even the devil's submit to us when we use your name*” – and the dawning awareness that this Christ has authority because he is indeed author of all creation, including themselves recreated in Christ. But this Christ, this authority, can also be resisted - there are wolves, or dragons, out there who know exactly how to get in touch with the wolves or dragons we carry within ourselves. So the going out is also always a going in- the lack of purse, haversack and sandals is not simply to accept the hospitality offered by God's presence in others but also to make room in ourselves for Christ, so that it really is Christ whom we take to others. We are empty of self but not of Christ and the marks we bear are those of Christ, as Paul puts it. Or closer to home in the words of Etty Hillesum in a book that has been on my shelves for a year or more but is finally getting the attention it deserves - its harrowing to read because we know the outcome will be her death in Auschwitz - partly self chosen because of her desire to be with her fellow Jews wherever that leads. Over and over again she takes the risk of love, to the point perhaps where it doesn't matter what religious label we now attach to her or as she comes to recognise in her battle not to hate those who oppress her

“Yes, we carry within us God and Heaven and Hell and Earth and Life and all of history. The externals are simply so many props; everything we need is within us. And we have to take everything that comes: the bad with the good, which does not mean that we cannot devote our life to curing the bad. But we must know what motives inspire our struggle, and we must begin with ourselves, every day anew”. 3rd July 1942

(p189 An Interrupted Life :The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum 1941-43)

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour