

Sunday 19A. 9.8.26

In a review of Pope Francis' life shortly after he died his biographer Austin Ivereigh summed up his apostate and spirituality as one of

*“creating agency for the spirit by centring on Christ”* (Tablet 26.4.25)

One could see Peter's failure in today's gospel passage in this light: he loses his focus on Christ and sinks beneath the waves. This prompted by the first line in today's psalm

*“I will hear what the Lord God has to say”,*

and Elijah's experience of focusing on God and finding God not in the storm or the earthquake or the fire but in the *“sound of a gentle breeze”* or, as another translation puts it, in *“a light silent sound”* – the point being that it's a matter of listening, of focus, of picking out one sound perhaps from many others – of not indeed being distracted by all the other noises and worries inevitably going on in our lives. It's not that one is making space for another voice or sound to be heard necessarily, a supernatural voice, a voice from out there but that one is allowing the voice or sound to be heard that matters now from among all the others. Please God, it's what I'm doing now in writing this homily.

‘I will hear what the lord God has to say’ or, as Austin Ivereigh also puts it it's *“to let the Spirit be the protagonist”*: the silence needed isn't necessarily out there but within – once again, a matter of focus of waiting on the Word, of allowing the unexpected to surface. Again, it's not that experience and knowledge are done away with, that no preparation is necessary, that there isn't a certain effort involved, but there comes a time when the curriculum vitae has to be put aside and one steps into the unknown, one faces the blank page without a clue as to where to go next. One is in effect waiting for inspiration, for the Spirit to have it's say. It's a recognition that we really don't know what comes next in our lives. That's the frightening bit and we find all sorts of ways to imagine otherwise, to fill that empty space that is not within our control. We look down and lose our focus. Austin Ivereigh also describes this process as one of *“self-transcendence”*, which I've always been wary of because it sounds a bit like pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps, with all the dangers of earning one's way into heaven and so on – a focus on the self which becomes unhealthy. But this isn't what Austin Ivereigh or Pope Francis were after: for them it means not a conquering of the self by the self but *“to come out of ourselves”* – to shift our focus to the stranger or the neighbour or, as I would say, the next most loving thing to do. Again this is not without preparation and experience and an engagement of all those traits and characteristics that make us all we are, that have taken us to this point but, in a

still silent sense, we have to let these go, forget about them, as we step into this world of the unexpected, the world as it truly, always in process of becoming.

I have two analogies in mind that might help.

Firstly the story of the painter who was asked to produce a picture of a chicken by a certain king and didn't until after sometime the king in exasperation asked for it again and the painter produced paper and brush and painted a perfect chicken there and then as the king looked on. "Well why didn't you do this earlier" said the king "when I first asked you?" "I've been practising," says the painter.

And the other analogy is of conducting a Common Bird Census at Strawberry Hill Farm during COVID. It was a spontaneous decision requiring total focus because the bird song was so rich: one has to keep moving forward while listening to perhaps ten or so different birds shouting their presence at you or sometimes whispering it with a call or sudden movement and plotting each sound or signal on a piece of paper for interpretation later. It requires a lot of past knowledge, an intense concentration, and most importantly, a surrendering of any idea that you already know what and where the birds should be. It's an experience of total presence which leaves one exhausted but happy – an experience in which one loses oneself and finds oneself at one and the same time, a sort of prayer, a sort of self- transcendence

. – not possible by the way with a Merlin App.

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