Sunday 30A . 25.10.26

In a deep sense we are all strangers to one another and perhaps even to ourselves, though we may be near-neighbours, even husband and wife, or members of a family, or a monastic community. There is something of the mystery of God about one another, and of the mystery of revelation. It's all to do with the direction of travel. Getting to know one another and realising that there is always more to know, is perhaps why exploring the mystery of ourselves and the mystery of God are inextricably linked. In this sense we become sacraments to one another, we discover sacredness through one another, including the sacredness of ourselves, and in this sense strangers, including our neighbours, become an opportunity to grow in holiness and self knowledge rather than a threat. Andre Louf, a monk and scholar, writes well of this in looking at vocation to the monastic life. Community living is essentially about allowing the presence of God in one another to allow the presence of God to grow in oneself – though it may not seem like that most of the time because we are so mired in a wounded sense of self, a self which wants to impose its will on others in order to find meaning. Indeed, we may be attracted to a community or indeed another person because we may find in them material to feed our own beloved self image or, in the words of Andre Louf:

"*the initial joys…are marked by a certain ambiguity. If he identifies himself easily with the community, it is also because it corresponds – without his being conscious of the fact – to his own self image, an image still highly idealised and more than flattering … Without knowing it he has annexed the community to* a *narcissistic image of himself (P17 In the School of Contemplation)*

There's much more in similar vein. We can all be doing this most of the time with one another – but this then becomes an opportunity for growth, for change, for an increased self-knowledge, if we can stay with it, if we can allow the mirror others present to us of our own imperfections to awaken us to this need for change. Surprisingly perhaps Andre Louf quotes Bernard of Clairvaux as saying

"*the first degree of love of others and of God.. is the merciful love of oneself."* P19

Again it's to do with direction of travel or, this time to quote from Laurence Freeman in a WCCM newsletter from 1995

"*we can so quickly drift from the truth which had once touched, inspired or even transfigured us. Yet it is not individual experiences but patterns of behaviour embedded in habit and lifestyle which are the real test of our nature and the direction in which we are going. When John Cassian (a monk of the 4th century Egyptian desert) wrote about human failures in compassion or purity of heart he warned us not to judge ourselves negatively on*

the basis of our individual lapses, but to look more wisely at the overall underlying pattern and drive in our character. Doing this we avoid the trap of reinforcing guilt reactions and we come instead to true insight, self knowledge and so to the humility which effects real change. Better to know oneself said an early monk than to work miracles."

This was said in the context of persevering with the practice of meditation without the expectation of ecstatic experiences.

And to come back once more to Andre Louf, to avoid the error of accepting everyone on equal terms discernment is still needed to protect the good of the community.

> "*if a candidate is presented who is richly talented but also unconsciously given to imposing his riches on the group we can remove him with a tranquil conscience. On the other hand, a candidate who is burdened with heavy personal baggage but who is aware of his frailties and is in a certain sense reconciled to them, and who knows by experience that he can unceasingly confess God's mercies towards him in his weakness, such a one we accept with thanksgiving, precisely because this experience of the mercy of God will translate in him sooner or later into a merciful tenderness towards everyone."* (p42,63 ibid)

Including that stranger at the door who has come to tell us something about ourselves and God

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour