

Thought for the Day 25-31 January

by Stephane McCarthy

Monday

Sandcastles and Transformation

The construction site of new houses on the edge of Panshanger country park opposite where I live is really coming on now. Strange to think only a few months ago it was an open field decorated with thousands of beautiful poppies which Forbes captured so perfectly in a photograph.



The other day as I walked past the site as I do most days for a walk, I stopped and marvelled at what looked like huge sandcastles that the diggers are piling up, thinking how even more amazed I would have been as a child – the way the operators manoeuvred those huge claws scooping the earth and moving it at dizzying speeds and with such grace and precision. The ingenuity of human beings!

I was imagining what impact this scene would have made to me as a child: working outside with really big boys and with those incredibly powerful diggers! So exciting compared to building sandcastles on the beach.

And, of course, nor will the sea destroy these sandcastles. On the contrary, these ones are being transformed into houses which will become homes for new people moving into our community, people just like us, going to work or retired, with the same problems and worries, secure job or looming unemployment, strong or in failing health, young or old, their children going to our schools or grandchildren visiting them, and hopefully before too long enjoying our restaurants, pubs and worshipping in our churches. New friends. All sharing the pleasures of Panshanger park.

From a beautiful sea of poppies to what appears to be mud baths and sandcastles and then on to homes. What a

transformation. Or in Richard Rohr's memorable words: 'order, disorder, and reorder or as Christians say, Resurrection'.

Tuesday

Beauty and truth in hidden places

Next time you are in St Andrew's church I urge you to go into the chapel where you will see what many people claim to be the most beautiful icon ever painted. It was created by the Russian painter Andrei Rublev in the 15th century.

I only noticed it for the first time recently. It hangs in the bottom right corner as you open the door. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before. By coincidence I had been reading Richard Rohr's extremely accessible and enlightening book on the Trinity, *The Divine Dance*. Early on he talks about this icon: Three men at a dining table, the Father in gold, representing majesty, the Son in blue representing unity with the earth and the Holy Spirit in green, suggesting birth and re-growth in nature.

The more you gaze at this icon the more you see and feel touched. There is a love, serenity and gentleness on the three faces and expressed by their posture that just draws you in. A pure perfect relationship.



Yet there is something which appears to be missing at the front in a small rectangular empty shape in which some people suggest Rublev had attached a real small mirror to the original icon. If true, the incredible idea is that in this divine and infinitely loving communion of the three persons, a fourth guest is being invited from all eternity to share in their banquet. And that is you and me, looking at the scene. All of us.

I love this interpretation as it means God isn't just inviting us to his heavenly banquet. That isn't enough for him, he wants us all to be on his own top table. And setting aside his infinite majesty his invitation is made ever so gently, so humbly offered, and uniquely made to suit to each of us individually.

Whoever decided to place that icon where it is was inspired, as its position seems to me to perfectly reflect God's incredible humility towards us.

Wednesday

Sovereignty

Talking about God's humility yesterday I am thinking about his sovereignty today.

The dictionary meaning of the word is supreme power or authority and it has been much in the news since our Brexit debate began.

I thought about it again at the conclusion of the trade talks with the EU after the deal was signed when Ursula von der Leyen said the following:

'Of course, this whole debate has always been about sovereignty. But we should cut through the soundbites and ask ourselves what sovereignty actually means in the 21st century.

For me, it is about being able to seamlessly do work, travel, study and do business in 27 countries. It is about pooling our strength and speaking together in a world full of great powers.

And in a time of crisis, it is about pulling each other up – instead of trying to get back to your feet alone.

The European Union shows how this works in practice. And no deal in the world can change reality or gravity in today's economy and today's world. We are one of the giants.'

You may not agree with me that the EU achieves this and you may call it idealism, but I love Ursula's aspiration to use strength to focus on unity and helping one another.



It really resonated with me, as from God's view the whole purpose of having sovereignty and power seems to be to choose to give it away and to share it with others, for their benefit as much as our own, not simply for our own families or country. This is

why such phrases as 'America First' or our own politicians talking about us being 'better' than everyone else makes so many of us cringe.

That selfish view of our country or ourselves runs completely counter to everything Jesus said and did, and the path he shows us to follow each day. If anyone had almighty power and the right to display it as he wished, it was him, but what did he do, he chose to let himself die a horrible death in total solidarity with every human being past present and to come who has endured suffering.

The vulnerability and humility of God. We can see it by simply looking again at that icon of the Trinity and the three persons' humble invitation to us to join them at their top table.

Thursday

Hands Opened to Let Go

Jesus says something intriguing to Mary Magdalene when she first sees him after his death: 'Do not cling to me...' (John 20. 17)

What did he mean? Don't cling to me when touch is so important to us human beings, not least it seems to Jesus. (Not surprising it is one of the hardest deprivations for many of us during this pandemic.)

On so many occasions people in distress simply needed to touch Jesus, just wanting to be healed by Jesus, for it to happen. Miracles happened automatically at times as soon as people touched Jesus, even before he saw them.

And now he is saying to Mary, one of his best friends, don't cling to me. Why? My favourite interpretation is that what Jesus is getting at here is that he doesn't want us to grasp onto



him and not let go, as it were (which is definitely my instinct!). If we clasp something with our hands and do not let go, grasping on to what we received, but don't unclasp our hands afterwards, we are unable to receive anything more, and certainly unable to pass on what we received to others.

I was always intrigued to see statues of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and saints in churches worldwide with their arms slightly raised and hands opened. Now I think I understand why. It is to show that they are open and ready to receive whatever God gives them, ever so

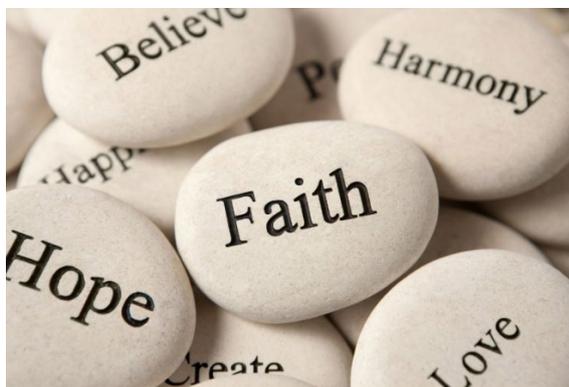
gently, and then to let it go, to share it with others, but then standing by ready for the process to start again, to receive more and then to pass it on. And so, in our own beautiful little ways, we mirror the eternal relationship and actions of the Trinity.

Friday

Giving Birth to Jesus

One of the things I love most about our Christian faith is that it is so non-exclusive and everyone is invited, no matter who they are and the accidents of their birth.

What on the face of it appears exclusive and rarefied, for example, the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and even the Trinity itself, the highest things of God, he seems to want to share them with us all in the most intimate way possible, if we will only freely consent in love to receive them.



Take the example of Mary giving birth to Jesus. A privilege of the highest order for one very special person. Of course, we can't physically give birth to Jesus again. But spiritually we all can, indeed that is God's desire for all of us, to share Mary's privilege,

as incredible as it may seem.

Ronald Rolheiser makes that very clear. He reminds us that giving birth spiritually is a dynamic and creative process. To bring Christ into the world involves an ongoing commitment to growth, to discomfort, to love, and to surrender. It is not for the faint of heart, but it is God's invitation to all of us. It is a lifetime commitment, however short or long.

Ronald says:

'Our task is to give birth to Christ. Mary is the paradigm for doing that... do some pondering, accept the pain of not understanding and of letting go. Christmas isn't automatic, it can't be taken for granted. It began with Mary, but each of us is asked to make our own contribution to giving flesh to faith in the world.'

Ronald Rolheiser, 'Mary as a Model of Faith' reflection on Luke 11:27-28 (7 December 2003)

Saturday

Saying Yes to God

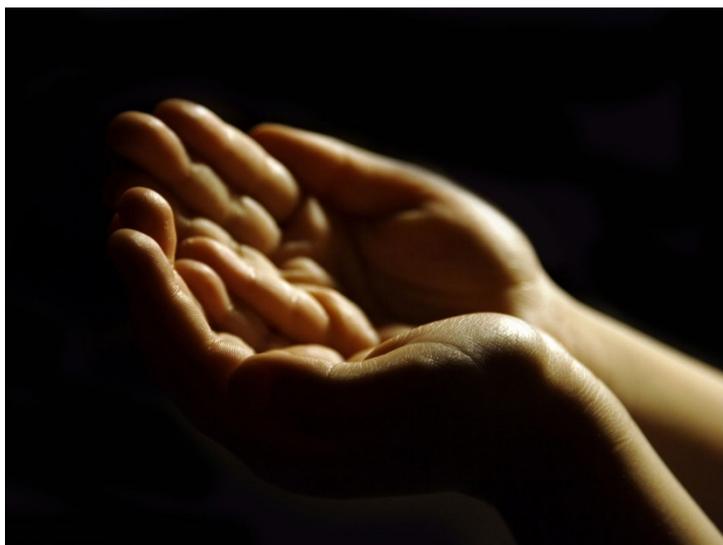
I came across these words by Thomas Keating recently and can't stop thinking about them. They seem to me to sum up so much of our earthly journey, our pilgrimage to Heaven.

They are particularly poignant at the moment.

'The Divine action may turn our lives upside down; it may call us into various forms of service. Readiness for any eventuality is the attitude of one who has entered into the freedom of the Gospel. Commitment to the new world that Christ is creating requires flexibility and detachment; the readiness to go anywhere or nowhere, to live or to die, to rest or to work, to be sick or to be well, to take up one service and to put down another. Everything is important when one transforms our worldly concepts of security into the security of accepting, for the lover of God, an unknown future.'

The love of God will take care of the rest of the journey...'

The Mystery of Christ; Open Mind Open Heart; Thomas Keating 1923-2018



Sunday

Immortal Diamond

Just as Alan has been saying about art, Wendy about hymns and Jane about music, poetry can sometimes, for a few moments, whisk us up into the realms of Heaven, cutting through all the layers and reaching directly to our hearts.

No better example is the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Here is the last part of one of his poems:

Across my foundering deck shone

A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash

Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,

I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,

Is immortal diamond.

That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection.
Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

We are back to our theme this week of letting go, surrendering and consenting to God's action to transform us into himself.



Here we are, Lord, Immortal Diamonds, thanks to you, and at your disposal.

What an adventure.