

Home Retreat : Saturday 11 January 2025

“..taste & see..”

..as the Christmas Season ends, some tasty left-overs..a Christmas card, a piece of Christmas cake, & a wedge of wensleydale cheese..

- ..for some 20yrs now, one of the retreats I have led here in our retreat house, the Grange, has the title “Art & Spirituality” where we take a piece of religious art & “open” it in the context of Lectio divina; divine reading “reading with your divine spectacles on” & “reading between the lines” & so allowing, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the essence of the painting & its religious/spiritual context [usually based on piece of scripture] to emerge..

..I compare the two..scripture & lectio divina in tandem..to Christmas cake & wensleydale cheese..the cake is the scripture..the cheese is the lectio..made in the Yorkshire Dales..where else?

many of you will have fond & recent memories of the taste of Christmas cake..not bought in M&S but home baked to grandma’s recipe & still/always the best.. traditional timeless like scripture..

..few of you will have thought to put a wedge of wensleydale with the cake..& what a combination, a taste to die for!..however, it has to be wensleydale, & certainly not Lancashire!..

..so this morning, you are invited to look at & into a piece of religious art from which we will consider it’s religious context, its scriptural background [the cake]..& then consider its relevance for us today 11 Jan 2025..as literally spiritually & relationally “the Word becomes flesh & lives among us..” [the cheese]

..the painting is entitled “the Rest on the Flight into Egypt” & you will see a depiction of it on your screen in a moment..there is also a copy of it with the notes of this talk, available on line on our website for you to download, & to pray & to ponder on later today, & beyond..

..artist is Harold Harvey [1874-1941]..he belonged to Newlyn School, an art colony of artists based in or near Newlyn in Cornwall, a fishing village close to Penzance from early 1880’s to early 20th century; they gathered there to paint in a more pure setting, emphasising natural light..Harold Harvey’s paintings centre on scenes of working class Cornish fishermen, farmers & tin miners among Cornish landscapes..

whilst you look at scene, I will read to you the scriptural context..Mt Ch 2 v 13-15.. which Harold would have read, prayed & pondered over, & then begun to sketch, a first outline of a scene which, weeks later, after more daily prayer & discernment, the painting we now see would emerge incarnationally “the Word becomes flesh & lives among us” indeed..120 yrs ago for Harold & this very morning for you & I..

“..after the wise men had left, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream & said, “Get up, take the child & his mother with you, & escape into Egypt, & stay there

until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child & do away with him.” So Joseph got up, & taking the child & his mother with him, left that night for Egypt, where he stayed until Herod was dead. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet; “I called my son out of Egypt.”

The paragraph inside the Christmas card tells us: “he [Harold] shows the Holy Family in the real present. The Christ Child blesses us from the harbour wall. The hills of Penwith are the backdrop, with the Cross as a signpost. The Lamb & Flag is the local & the Agnus was the secret sign of Catholics in the time of persecution.”

I think the siting of the scene on the harbour wall prepares a context..both the sea & the relationships within the Holy Family were tidal..high tide moments, when life is full & good, generous, self-sacrificial with a fullness of divine love evident..& other times low tidal, with an emptiness an absence..a breakdown/brokenness of humanity with the flotsam & jetsom of family life washed up on beach..with a smell all of its own, waiting hopefully patiently for the next high tide & its ability to carry the dross away & bring freshness & harvest to shore..

..so what of Joseph?..foster father never to be a real father..”a man of honour” he stayed, when it would have been better for him if he had, as scripture suggested, “divorced Mary informally” & left..Bicci de Lorenzo’s 16th cent depiction of birth of Jesus shows Joseph “beached” isolated lost, some yards from manger, his knapsack with food for one by his side, as Mary, leaving infant Jesus vulnerable & at risk for few moments to respond to the vulnerability of Joseph, stands beside him, praying for him to himself decide to return..for a divine high tide moment..which was to come.. but for now, in his humanity, a low tide moment as he looks exhausted spent..a dazed distant look as he tiredly dutifully feeds the donkey, itself sharp-eared alert, & seemingly ready for next stage of journey..

..& of Mary?..she too looks torn..a dignity to her..a quiet pride in who she has been asked to be..a fear in her facial expression, a wonderment “what will become of my child?” not “our” child “my” child..her back turned towards Joseph, as if to acknowledge the distance/gap between them..& always to be so..divorce or not.. a plainness of hair & simplicity in dress, reflecting her character & her spirituality.. that trust..in spite of everything, a faith that it has to be, & grace will see her, & them, all three of them, through in the end..”let it be done to me according to your word”.. ”..& the angel left her”..alone ever to be alone..alone but not lonely..her hands are women’s/mother’s hands large strong well-worn dependable..with her left hand she leans on wall for support, her right hand ready in an instant to react to any need from her child..& in a pondering moment, where she says nothing but thinks everything.. ”how can this come about since I am a virgin” an echo, she hears herself saying all those months earlier..months of more low tides than high tides, & now on this harbour wall, the answer is made flesh..Son of God son of Mary..dwells here among us..

..& the infant himself?..sturdy alert fully alive, human & divine..comfortable steady on the wall, the division between his past thus far behind the wall, & his future in front of wall, & its low tide/high tide moments for his life & ministry still to emerge ..how much or how little did he really know at this early stage in his humanity?..&

even then a right hand of blessing for those who, in faith, face up to him..hold eye & heart contact with him..a blessing almost of “whatever is yet to come”..for him & for us..open ended open hearted..”Father, let it be as you not I would have it” said now on the breakwater & again later in Gethsemane, in his lowest of low tide moments..

..the signpost with two directions..read & choose..is it on to Egypt or back to Bethlehem?.. & even now, a human hesitation, to go on into the unknown, or back to face the wrath of Herod..still doubt, still need, for blind faith..& onwards to the ultimate destination of Golgotha & crucifixion..& did they find warmth welcome & hospitality in the Inn in the background?..its welcome sign depicts the Lamb & the flag..Christ as the victorious Lamb of God [Agnus Dei] of the Book of Revelation, carrying a banner with its red Cross..the hope promise fulfilment of salvation history beyond & through the Cross to the Resurrection..the ultimate high tide which never ebbs for eternity..

• ..so, as in every religious painting..prayed about, pondered, sketched, painted & evolving daily..& centuries sometimes after it was inspiringly created, where am I? ..in whom do I see myself & my family & others in my faith community on 11 Jan 2025?..my pilgrim journey in this Year of Jubilee as we are enrolled as “pilgrims of hope” alongside Mary Joseph & the infant Jesus, as we, this morning “rest” on retreat ..on our journey in faith, our flight from those aspects of life which threaten our growth in faith as the world, like Herod, searches us out to tempt us into a self-inflicted extinction of our life & lifestyle distant from Christ..putting at risk our daily tidal pilgrimage as our maturing wisdom in humanity, with its mistakes regrets & infidelities, weaves into our emerging understanding of our own divinity..our personal reformation..

..today a day of “rest” we are in the very best of company as we lean against the harbour wall & look out over it..at the beyondness of things.. & perhaps I will leave you with the final words of Clarissa Pinkola Estes, in my last Home Retreat last October, when she spoke of each of us being seaworthy vessels & left us with the thought of a lifetime..

“when a great ship is in harbour & moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for.”

..enjoy the “rest” of today on your retreat..& be ready to cast off the mooring ropes & set sail on tonight's high tide..”pilgrims seafarers of hope..”

..& I wonder what name will you give to your boat for 2025?..imagine that.. ..in this pilgrim Year of Jubilee, is your boat a pleasure boat, a migrant's dinghy, a fishing boat, an RNLI lifeboat. or a Border Force custody vessel?..

Let us pray

Almighty ever living God, who were pleased to shine forth with new light through the coming of your Only Begotten Son, grant we pray, that, just as he was pleased to share our bodily form through the child-bearing of the Virgin Mary, so we too may one day merit to become companions in his kingdom of grace.

We make our prayer through him who lives & reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever & ever, Amen.

- On line for you to muse on later on your retreat day I leave you;

..poem “the flight into Egypt” by Thomas Merton Trappist monk written in 1944 & its links to facism in Merton’s time & to the Middle East in our own time..

..the painting itself

..the notes of my sharings with you this morning..

..& a piece of music..google it..on youtube..called “the beyondness of things” written by John Barry..Yorkshireman..listen to it as you lean on seawall alongside Mary..

..& if you want the happy ending to your retreat day, later today, as Joseph listened & responded to angel & brought Mary & infant Jesus out of Egypt, listen to John Barry’s “out of Africa”..

& thank you for being here..

[blessing]

• The flight into Egypt

Through every precinct of the wintry city
squadroned iron resounds upon the streets;
Herod's police
make shudder the dark steps of the tenements
at the business about to be done.

Neither look back upon Thy starry country,
nor hear what rumours crowd across the dark
where blood runs down these holy walls,
nor frame a childish blessing with Thy hand
towards that fiery spirit of exulting souls!

Go, child of God, upon the singing desert,
where, with eyes of flame,
the roaming lion keeps thy road from harm.

Thomas Merton [1944]

Trappist monk, spiritual writer & poet [1915-1958]
Monk of Abbey of Gethsemane Kentucky USA

Merton was troubled by the rise of totalitarianism in the world, & the lines
"squadroned iron resounds upon the streets/ Herod's police/ make shudder
the dark steps of the tenements" evokes the image of a fascist police unit
going about its ugly business.

Too close to home & comfort in our own consciences, to see in it the dark
& still continuing work of the Israel Defence Forces in Gaza, reflecting the
work of the brutal constabulary of the infant Jesus' time.



Harold Harvey 35.