The Front Page

Everyday Ignatian Spirituality



Christopher Gleeson SJ

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With Gratitude -
To the Church of Brisbane and the Jesuit Community of
St Ignatius Toowong,
where most of this book was written -
ever 'Open to Change and Committed to the Unchanging'

(Daniel Street, Class of 1998, St Ignatius' College, Riverview, 22.9.2011)

First Word
A Transparent World

The following pages were written over a five year period for the front page of the weekly newsletter of St Ignatius Parish. Hence the title of the book. When that wily Toowong Parish Priest, Father Peter Quin SJ, originally asked me to write a weekly front page for the newsletter, the intention was to help parishioners and others reflect on the gospel of the Sunday. Since that time increasing work commitments made it very difficult to write a weekly column and relevance to the Sunday readings became less central. Nonetheless, an Index has been compiled at the end of the book to assist those seeking some enlightenment for the Sundays of the liturgical calendar. May there be something here for you.

Earlier in 2009 I opened my editorial for *Madonna* magazine with the following words:

> Writing this editorial does not always come easily. Writing of any description is rarely a steady flow of impressive words. Sometimes it makes authors vulnerable, open to criticism, even ridicule and rejection, yet it brings us into contact with our souls. When Associate Editor, David Lovell, sent me a 'hurry up' notice this time, it seemed I had a hole in the soul. No great ideas were emerging, no movements of the heart were happening until, while drawing the curtains in my bedroom that same night, I dislodged a beautiful Waterford crystal statue of the Madonna and child. It fell with a thud, but without breakage, onto my desk and suddenly I knew what should emanate from my lap top for this editorial. That statue is full of powerful memories for me.

For most of the 'front pages' that follow, my inspiration has been twofold—to elaborate some touching story from my everyday life experience, however banal, and use it as a stepping stone to illustrate how we might more easily find God and be found by God in all things.

Central to Ignatian spirituality is the belief that our world is transparent, reflecting constantly a God who works in the depths of everything. St Ignatius Loyola saw the world as very 'user friendly'. Everything belongs. For him every part of it, from the stars in the heavens to the flowers of the field, elevated his mind and heart to God. In Ribadeneira's *Life of Ignatius* we learn:

> 'How even the smallest things could make his spirit soar upwards to God, who even in the smallest things is Greatest. At the sight of a little plant, a leaf, a flower or a fruit, an insignificant worm or a tiny animal Ignatius could soar free above the heavens and reach through into things which lie beyond the senses.' (*Life III 5381*)

Seeking and finding God in all things works on the belief that God is already present in our world and it is our task to uncover his presence and help others to do the same. It is very different to the old, perhaps arrogant, concept of ministry which talked about 'bringing God to the world'. As the famous Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner said so well: 'The grace of God has always been there ahead of our preaching . . . Hence our preaching is not really an indoctrination with something alien from outside, but the awakening of something within, as yet not understood but nevertheless really present.'[1] It is allowing the Hound of Heaven in Psalm 139, who knows us intimately from our Mother's womb, to seek us out and provide for us.

For Christians who celebrate sacraments as part of their faith, seeking and finding God in all things should be second nature. For sacramental people, the world is translucent—'drenched with grace'—as Wendy Wright once described it. After all, our sacraments are 'celebrations of what is already there in human experience', to use Karl Rahner's words again. So, one will find all sorts of stepping stones to God in the following pages—tooth brushes, trite sayings, underwear, fire, comfort zones. May you find something here that draws you closer to God. May it soften your heart and make it mellow and grateful. May it enable you to drop your guard and experience God's be profound and uniquely personal love for you.

1. K Rahner, 'On the Significance in Redemptive History of the Individual Member of the Church', in *Mission and Grace*, 1 (1963), 156.


VERGINE · IMMACOLATA · MARIA
MADRE · DEL · DIVINO · AMORE
FATECI · SANTI
GRAZIA · MADONNA !

A Blessing

One of the favourite blessings of our beloved parish priest is found in the beautiful first reading for Mary's Feast Day as Mother Of God on New Year's Day, taken from the Book of Numbers: 'May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord show you His face and bring you peace.'

It is worth remembering that the act of blessing another is not some ponderous gesture reserved to priests and officials. In the Jewish tradition parents have always blessed their children. Indeed, for the Jews, every greeting was a form of blessing. When we bless someone, we affirm them and put them in touch with their innate goodness. More importantly, we let them know that they are beloved by God, the source of all our gifts. To bless another is to source life for them—to remind them that life is a journey from God to God. To be blessed is to be oneself a blessing, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said. Blessing another reminds them that they are a blessing, a gift to us. Sometimes we are blessed in ways we can not imagine. Joan Chittister with her characteristic simplicity, has written: 'Instead of getting what we want, we get what we need.'[1] Blessing, nonetheless, is always a sign that grace is everywhere, that life is sacred and good and full of the touch of God.

On this Feast Day of Mary as Mother of God, we thank God for the blessing that Mary is to us. Among the many gifts she has bequeathed to us is the capacity to treasure life and ponder it in her heart. Listening with the heart is the capacity to stop and ponder the meaning of our experiences and the direction of our life, to have the ability to place a mirror on our actions and reflect back to ourself the value of our activities. For so many of us life is allowed to wash over us without true reflection. 'We progress by stopping' wrote Meister Eckhart, the great German Dominican preacher of the thirteenth century. The world, however, wants to keep us and our young people on the move, to live life on the surface. Why else would the seats at places like fast food outlets be so hard, if not to keep us on the move?

1. Joan Chittister, *Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir* (Oxford: Sheed and Ward, 2004), 14.

As we begin a new year let us model ourselves on Mary and live our lives with great trust in God. We might take to heart the words used by King George VI in the darkness facing Britain at the outset of the Second World War during Christmas, 1939: 'I said to the Man who stood at the gate of the year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown". And he replied, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light and safer than a known way!"'



A Finger Pointing to the Moon

In Joan Chittister's wonderful book, *Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir*, she relates the following story of some disciples who were distraught at the imminent death of their Master: '"If you leave us, Master," they pleaded, "how will we know what to do?" And the Master replied, "I am nothing but a finger pointing at the moon. Perhaps when I am gone you will see the moon." The meaning is clear: It is God that religion must be about, not itself. When religion makes itself God, it ceases to be religion.'[1]

Entirely without self-preoccupation, John the Baptist points beyond himself to Jesus. Jesus is the centre of his attention and he draws the attention of the two young idealists to Him. 'Behold, there is the Lamb of God.' The moment he points Jesus out, he is a marked man, a man marked for death, but death for the life of others. In brief, John the Baptist models for all of us Christians what our role is to be—that of the pointer, the lamplighter.

In the time before there were electric lights on our city streets, a person would have the responsibility of being the lamplighter and lighting the gas lamps at dusk and extinguishing them before dawn. As he went down one street and up another, people would watch him doing his work. They would watch him until the sun went down and they could not see him any more. But they could see new light come forth.

This is for me a wonderful image of what a Christian life is all about and what lies behind this challenge for all of us. Those who are Christians continue to light new lights and we can follow their path by the lights they have left behind. They become for us a light in the darkness. A true Christian, therefore, is one whose track you can follow by the light he or she leaves burning. In all the darkness of our world we need to remember that we are meant to be a light of hope in our world. The way we care for other people, the way we affirm and encourage them, is our way of being a lamplighter. Each time you light a candle, you might

1. Joan Chittister, *Called to Question: A Memoir* (Oxford: Sheed and Ward, 2004), 14.

remember your role as a lamplighter and the beautiful prayer, which is used in Salisbury Cathedral, England that reads:

Lighting a candle is a prayer;
When we have gone it stays alight
Kindling in the hearts and minds
Of others the prayers
We have already offered for them
and for others
For the sad, the sick, and the suffering
and prayers of thankfulness too.
Lighting a candle is a parable;
Burning itself out,
It gives light to others.
Christ gave himself for others.
He calls us to give ourselves.
Lighting a candle is a symbol;
Of love and hope,
Of light and warmth.
Our world needs them all.





