

Christian Perspectives: Considerations while in paradise

I am at this moment in time, sitting looking over a hillside in Tuscany, the tinkling bells of the nearby sheep the morning music to which I wake. Their shepherdess hovers nearby. The small, cream coloured bodies circle the large open area throughout the day with no fence enclosing them while she keeps watch, never seeming to interfere, and reminding me of those same shepherds we revere from our foundational Christian story.

I am told there are wild boar in the area, so perhaps between the bells around their necks and the watchful eye of their every present care giver, there is some measure of safety. And too, the tall cypress trees that mark the landscape like ancient sentinels seem to offer further protection, their stoic, silent companionship holding the wisdom of the ages that knows, as did Julian of Norwich, that 'all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.' I wonder that old trees and certain human spirits hold the same knowledge, and in it, offer the same protection to humankind.

In this idyllic spot I find myself - the gift of unwavering beauty and peace in the Italian countryside offered by loving friends - it is easy to forget that this world is in deep trouble.

This is so, a fact of our time that cannot be repudiated even by the casually observant. This nags at me, pulling at my garments like a small child demanding attention, a thought that never leaves my side. Strangely, it in no way diminishes my joy of waking to the surrounding beauty, nor the sweetness of my husband's companionship, nor the enjoyment of the delicious food for which the area is famed ? and rightly so. But it travels with me, as does Jesus' presence, my on-going prayers to the great mystery I address as 'father and mother', and all that I am trying to unravel of this mess we have gotten ourselves into. If humanity is in trouble, I am in trouble. How could it be otherwise?

It may also be that Albert Nolan's seminal work, 'Jesus Before Christianity' has been travelling with me and has captured my imagination, and in the way of great books, is ever present in my thinking. Nolan is a South African priest who earlier in his life called the church to account for its part in apartheid and then worked tirelessly to unravel a system of institutionalised violence and racism that flew in the face of all that Jesus taught. If, at the moment, Christendom is seeing the last of its power dissipate, it is in no small measure due to our refusal to try and see Jesus outside the faith that created him as its own treasure and then refused to share ? spiritual parsimoniousness being the worst of transgressions. As Nolan observes, Jesus never did belong to any one group of people, any more than the wisdom of the trees can be hoarded. Jesus belongs to humanity. And if, at last, what he was trying to teach through his life and death, is released free of its religious boundaries, then all Christians should rejoice that at last the man who desired radical freedom for all people, should be set free to teach us what he may. And he can teach us quite a lot, given that the times we live in now bear much similarity to his own time, though granted our situation is direr, and ever more complicated.

We have created a political, economic and social order that has turned upon itself and can only advance by eating its own young, or more specifically, those that can't keep up with the frantic pace of avarice that consumes our decision making in a world where people matter less and less, and profit is master. We are headed toward disaster on every front, with no seeming way out of the tsunami headed our way because the way things are is so infirmly entrenched in our minds, we can find no way out of our dilemma. As Albert Einstein wisely observed, 'We can't solve problems by using the same level of consciousness and the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.' Jesus knew this in his time, and spiritual genius that he was, he offered those who would listen, a different consciousness that pushed back at the tribal thinking of his culture and offered a new way of being that allowed people to connect to one another in a visual way, upending the domination paradigm and unleashing a communion paradigm that called us to work with one another, not against one another.

But here we are 2000 years later, and the faith that made such a point of embracing his teaching, created instead one more institution that upheld the status quo. Goodness, we are slow learners.

But here is a thought from the extraordinary Simone Weil, who more than any other thinker from the 19th century understood the lay of the land. I do not possess either her staggering intellect or her ability to suffer, but I do align myself with her view of the

world, and our place in it. She calls us to take up arms, spiritual arms, for the revolution is upon us, and everyone must decide what they will do.

?In all the history now known, there has never been a period in which souls have been in such peril as they are today in every part of the globe... We are living in times that have no precedent... Today it is not nearly enough to be a saint. We need the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself also without precedent. This new type of sanctity would be a fresh spring, an invention...almost equivalent to a new revelation... This is the thing we have to ask for now; and we have to ask for it as a famished child asks for bread. The world needs saints who have genius...?

Could it be that this genius she calls us to, is the genius of Jesus before Christianity, but now sprinkled in unexpected places in the wider landscape? I am hoping so.