

Sean Fagan (1927-2016) - The Sacrament of the Present Moment (Adapted)

No moment is too insignificant for encounter

Our relationship with time is a crucial factor in our relationship with God, and at times hurry may indeed be a heresy. One who is too busy to pray is simply too busy! But few people have total freedom in choosing their social setting, so we have to make the best of what is possible in our situation. It is good to try to rooted in the insights of Jean Pierre de Caussade's spiritual classic, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*. The heart of his teaching is the conviction that God's purpose is made actual for each one of us precisely in the totality of the situation (physical, psychological, moral and spiritual) in which we find ourselves at each single moment of our conscious lives, and that his purpose is one of infinite, tender, merciful and all-powerful love. Our response is to live that moment to the full.

How much of our precious time is taken up with either the past or the future, while the present slips away unnoticed! The past contains our memories, the future our hopes, but our immediate task is the present moment. And how we try to avoid it, run away from it! Many of us spend our time wishing for things we could have if we didn't spend half our time just wishing. Or as someone has more poetically put it: *'I spend my days stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I came to sing remains unsung.'* Even apart from day-dreaming, it is surprising how much we can get done just trying to avoid what we should be doing. We tidy our room, polish our shoes, even make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament - rather than write that difficult letter, prepare that lecture, visit that awkward person. One of the most common ailments today is imaginary fatigue, to avoid work or some other painful activity. It is not restricted to ordinary people; many a genius has resorted to it.' We have it on the authority of Robert Schumann's doctor that when the composer had to begin a new concerto he was *'seized with fits of trembling, fatigue and coldness of the feet'* - literally cold feet!

Not all of us may go to such extremes, and perhaps 'cold feet' is often no more than a mild metaphor, but the fact remains that we still try to dodge the task of the moment. Our reflection may be helped by recalling a special moment in the gospel. Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain, and he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as snow. Peter exclaimed 'Lord, it is good for us to be here!' A bright cloud covered them with shadow and a voice came: *'This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him'*. They fell on their faces, overcome with fear, but Jesus touched them and said: *'Stand up, do not be afraid.'* And when they looked up they saw no one but only Jesus.

Peter's remark was a natural reaction, a spontaneous exclamation which most of us have made at one time or another at the experience of pleasure or joy. Whatever the pleasure - the company of a friend, the enjoyment of a sunset, or the satisfaction of something achieved - how often have we wished that time would stand still, that the moment could be prolonged? But time moves on, the sun goes down and we are back to the old routine. It was no different for Peter. Even before he came down from the mountain, the ecstasy was over. *When they raised their eyes, they saw no one but only Jesus, their familiar beloved teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.*

Few of us will have such transfiguration experiences, but we can all recall moments of divine intimacy when we could say with real feeling, *'Lord, it is good to be here.'* On those occasions it was a spontaneous remark, a natural consequence of our enjoyment. If only we could develop the habit of repeating that remark, at every moment of the day and night, *'Lord, it is good to be here'*, not necessarily with the excitement and enthusiasm of Peter at the transfiguration, but with the deep conviction that God is truly present in this moment.

We might be familiar with the expression *'Christ the sacrament of God.'* Christ is not only the revelation of God, but is God himself in person. Likewise, the Church as sacrament of Christ, is not only the sign of Christ's presence, but for those who believe, she brings Christ into our very midst (people, word, Eucharist, communion). Again, the seven sacraments, each in its own way, are special encounters with Christ. They not only signify or point to Christ and his grace, but when properly celebrated they bring us into personal contact with him. There is something similar in the Present Moment. The past is no longer with us and the future has yet to come. What we have before us at any given time is simply the present moment. This day, this hour, this very minute. This is the God-given time we have immediately under our control. If God is to reveal himself to us, it will be in this present moment. It is not a question of mystical experience or private revelation, but simply the conviction that in responding to the requirements of my situation in this precise moment I encounter God.

We have only to recall the appearances of the risen Christ to be convinced that any moment is the right moment for God, that no moment is too ordinary or insignificant for encounter. He came to his disciples as

they were walking away in disillusionment, but he left them travelling in wonder. He appeared beside the empty tomb, which seemed to be the end of everything. We have no record of appearances in the Temple or in the synagogue, but we know that he appeared to men who were at their fishing, to people in the midst of their day's work. Again, he made himself known in the breaking of bread. He showed himself in the upper room, where his disciples were in prayer, but still afraid. These special encounters with Christ took place at all sorts of odd moments in prayer, at work, in disappointment, doubt and fear. The lesson is obvious: as the Incarnation has made all creation holy, the glory of the risen Christ is reflected in every detail of our Christian lives. It is true that he no longer comes as he did in those miraculous appearances between the Resurrection and the Ascension. We meet him now in faith, but the encounter is no less real. We speak of his real presence in the Blessed Sacrament, but this, too, is a meeting in faith. To meet Christ in the present moment, in the circumstances of our daily lives, is to meet him in faith, but the encounter is still real.

This insight of the sacrament of the present moment can cause surprise only to those who have a distorted notion of the Christian life - people who see the natural and the supernatural as two separate levels superimposed one upon the other. But this is to misunderstand the consecration of baptism, to miss out completely on the fact that literally everything we do in the state of grace can be worship. St Paul exhorts us: *'Offer your body as a living sacrifice to God. Let your whole lives be lives of worship.'* Our divinisation in baptism is also our humanisation. We have been made children of God in a renewed humanity. God is pleased with our acts of courtesy as much as with our prayers, with our enjoyment of nature or the miracle of computers as with our adoration in chapel, with our human friendships, sincerity and loyalty as much as with our faith or charity so long as we act with the heart of a child of God.

There is literally no area in life which is cut off from grace and worship. God does not have to close his eyes when we take a bath or go to bed. At all times we *'must have that mind which is in Christ Jesus,'* and as mature Christians we must evaluate our actions, our attitudes, our way of life. But the basic truth remains that our holiness, the call of grace, lies in an ever-growing, ever more complete and humble acceptance of our life and of each moment as it comes. This means accepting ourselves as we are, with our ailments, our failures, our discouragements, our sufferings, our shame, our loneliness. It is so easy to say, *'Lord, it is good to be here,'* in moments of pleasure and satisfaction, in times of consolation and near-ecstasy, but the real test is to be able to repeat those same words with naked will when our natural wish is to be elsewhere.

Like Jesus in Gethsemane, it is lawful and natural to want to escape, to ask that we be spared the suffering, that the chalice pass away, this is simply the normal reaction of the healthy organism, body language in a sense. But at the same time our spirit of faith comes into play and with firm will we say *"Thy will be done."* Whatever the suffering, small or great, misunderstanding, rejection or failure depression, loneliness, our acceptance in faith should be total: *'Lord, it is good to be here, because you will it, or allow it, and for whatever length of time you allow it. This is to repeat Christ's own obedience and surrender to the Father.'*

On occasion God will break his silence and discreetly drop a hint that he is there. These delicate, unobtrusive signs of consolation help us in the performance of our daily task, they remind us that God is there, but he is no less there in the other moments. Every moment is the right moment for God. As St Paul tells us: *'all things work towards good for those who love God.'* The present moment, which should bring us encounter with Christ, seems so ordinary, insignificant, monotonous, painful or boring, that we seldom think of it as important to God. As if God were interested only in the extraordinary, the spectacular. We make the mistake of looking for something new and exciting, a new sanctity to revolutionise Christianity, and we miss what we have here and now: Christ in us, Christ with us, here and now. The beauty and the glory of the gospel is blossoming today and every day wherever Christ is in the heart of any person. He is not only waiting for us, but is actually with us in every moment. If we could be faithful to this sacrament of the present moment, at first perhaps in times of joy, not using our enjoyment as a 'reminder' of Christ, but actually finding Christ in the joy, then we could extend it to other, more painful moments and gradually to all moments, until it becomes almost second nature to exclaim, *'Lord, it is good to be here.'*

This cultivated habit will prepare us for the big moments, the important decisions calling for a special act of faith. When our biggest moment of all comes, the moment of our own personal transfiguration as we shine with the whiteness of death, we can repeat Peter's remark with awe and trembling, but also with tremendous confidence. In that very instant, when time is no more, we can exclaim, *'Lord, it is good to be here,'* and mean it as we have never meant it before. And afterwards, even if there is no need to frame the actual words, our heart will go on singing for all eternity: *'Lord, it is good to be here,' 'Lord, it is good to be here.'*