

## A Reflection for the Start of a New Season

September 5<sup>th</sup>

'Be still then, and know that I am God,' says the Psalmist: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,' he continues – because he has learnt how to 'taste and see how gracious the Lord is' (Psalms 46.10; 23.4; 34.8). The 'spiritual life' is about recognizing that *stillness*, not only in the places of opportunity and joy, but also in times of struggle and pain; knowing the *Presence of God* in it all; and that all which God does is *good*. Sometimes we must let go of things which are



not good – but they are *our* things, not *God's*. The spiritual life is the nurture of an attitude of heart in which we *discern* this. (In the spiritual tradition, 'discernment' is the *recognition of God*, and the making of good choices about how to do so *more completely*.)

There are *places* which have inspired me on this path. There have also been *books*. Sometimes they describe *personal experience* of the spiritual journey of discovery; sometimes they reflect on the *Biblical images* of the places where God appears to his friends. Among these are the *mountains* – especially the clouds in which their summits are hidden; the *deserts* – which seem arid and bleak until we notice their oases; and *gardens* – where the Water of Life springs up, bringing flowers and trees to fruition.

For me, the first of the books which really opened this spiritual terrain is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written – nobody knows who wrote it – in the late 1300s, but still fresh today. It pictures the cloud on the top of the mountain where Moses *waited for God*, and its subject is the nature of our *spiritual encounter*. It is not about words or ideas or thoughts, but about a kind of *hope-filled trust* which refuses to be swayed by the things which we *see* or *perceive*: it learns to recognise God's quiet Presence, with a *restfulness of heart*, come what may.

I went on to read John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. 'When the soul is strong God will lead it into the desert,' says Teresa – to a place where our knowledge of God will be *challenged* and *stretched*. It is the place where

Elijah was *tested* and *made strong*. Teresa and John encourage us to be less controlled by our *ego* and *will* – not to let neediness and longing distort our judgement – so that *the image of God* deep within us will become increasingly transparent. John's *Dark Night of the Soul* – a guide for times of soul-searching – compares our spiritual growth to the effect within us of a great light. At first it overwhelms us and seems to be blinding, but as we become accustomed to its effects, it warms us and thrills us and enlightens the path which beckons us on.

I read Ignatius of Loyola and Francis of Assisi. Like Teresa and John, Ignatius encourages us to be *completely honest* with ourselves about the



times when our faith seems to falter, or we feel overwhelmed and weak. But this is because Jesus comes to us as *a friend*: we have no need to hide or pretend. For Francis, this friendship – full of radiance and joy – embraces the whole of creation. It is like finding our way back to the Garden of

Eden, where '*all things are made new*' (Revelation 21.5) – coming home from a voyage of discovery which has *transported us* beyond what we thought ourselves to be. We might sometimes have felt lost, but we have found *wonderful things which are new*.

That sense of *homecoming* is especially strong in a precious little book by Julian of Norwich. Her *Revelations of Divine Love* are an exquisite meditation on the way in which *everything* – both the *beauty* of the world, but also its *pain* – are held tenderly *within God's embrace*. All things –



including all the different and sometimes conflicting parts of our own selves – come together: they are *comforted and healed*, and the garden which God has created – both the visible garden of *the world as a whole*, and the hidden garden which is a picture of our *soul* – can burst into flower and flourish. May it be so for us all. Happy reading!