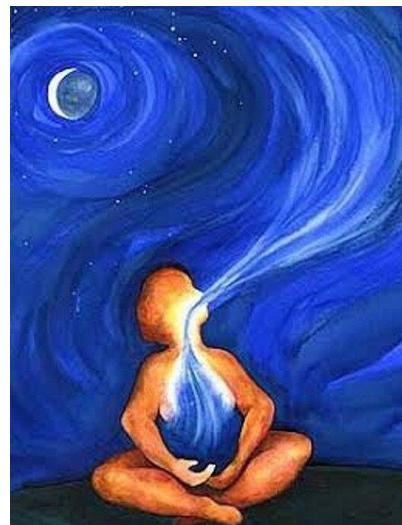


***Nothing more practical than Stardust,
nothing more sensible than wilderness Love...***



When someone sets out to find themselves,

they are also seeking God¹.

So Pope Francis said, and I think he's right. When we search for who we really are, or especially who we are truly meant to be... it leads us back to the heart of the One who created us.

We find our way home... to ourselves, and to God ... from all the tangles and distractions and hurts and bruises of life... through letting him remind us of the truth of who we are, and the truth of what we can be.

Because, I believe you could also say ...

.....When someone sets out to find God,

they are also finding themselves.

Lent is about coming home. To God, and to ourselves.

They say that what you most choose to look at, is the thing which directs your heart. I wonder... if an alien landed on earth today and tried to work out what we worshipped from where we direct our gaze... what would it conclude? Would it be our smart phones? Our to-do lists? Our shames and fears? People we hero-worship a bit, or perhaps the inward spirals of our hearts and minds? Would it be particular people that we love, or the natural world in which we delight?

¹ Pope Francis *A Gift of Joy and Hope*, Hodder & Stoughton, p. 24

Our hearts can get caught up in so many things. Some are beautiful, life-giving and from God.... Some are distractions and brokennesses that limit us, and stop us from becoming our true selves. Lent calls us to reflect, and to 'repent'. The word 'repent' meaning, as I am sure many of you know – to turn around, to re-orient ourselves.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume... store up treasures in heaven... says Jesus

Sanctify a fast, says the Prophet Joel, Return to me with all your heart.

What is a Lenten Fast? Well... it's taken many forms over the years. The ancient fasts of the church used to involve keeping a diet free of alcohol, dairy, meats and oils all the way through to Easter (excepting the feast days in Lent)... the idea being twofold: to draw ourselves into solidarity with the poor, helping us become aware of the hungers and injustices of the world - and to help us to see where we look for comfort and sustenance – recognising our frailty, and our need for God.

These days such severe fasts are not generally commendable in the hectic pace of life, and with our understanding of physical and mental wellbeing. But if those are the purposes of a Fast – to draw us back to looking to God as our rock, and our nourishment, and into awareness of the needs of those around us, and our own fragilities: to putting God back at our centre - what would such a Fast look like for *us*? Later, the Fast used to be called a discipline – *discipl-ine*, like disciple – from the Latin *discere* – *to learn*. A Lenten learning experience, then – something that helps us grow in faith.

Will giving up chocolate or biscuits, or taking up strenuous fitness challenges draw us back to the Father's heart? Maybe.... But let us offer it prayerfully, and make sure that our abstinence, or efforts, truly are rooted in directing us back to God, and helping us to re-find ourselves...

Perhaps it might help us to take a little time aside to reflect and find what it is this year for us that might help us home to the Father's heart – *Go into your room*, says Jesus in our gospel reading, (the room was often a way of speaking of the heart), *and pray to your Father...*

Rend your hearts, and not your clothing, says the prophet Joel. Lent calls us to be a little vulnerable; to open our hearts and fall in love again – to fall in love with God, and, in so doing, to re-find too the person that God is in love with inside ourselves.

For where your treasure is, says Jesus, there your heart will be also.

I don't know if many of you have read the *Lord of The Rings*, and know of the creature, Gollum, who is consumed by something he calls his 'precious' – a particular belonging – a ring, which he keeps in his pocket and which gives him a sense of power. But the more time he spends with it, the more it consumes him. What is our *precious*, I wonder? What have we got in the pockets of our hearts? What would the aliens see us looking at? Where do we invest our hopes, and place our foundations? And are they solid ground, good soil in which we can grow?

The ash of Ash Wednesday reminds us how fragile we are, how much we need each other and God. How easily we crumble inside – how easily the world around us – or even the things we use as props and foundations – can fall to dust.

But ash is also a sign of hope – bearing, as it does, the fingerprints of God – the love of the creator of the universe.

In the beginning of the Bible, God makes us humans, the most advanced creation the world has ever seen – from ash, from the dust.

There is a deeper truth written into all creation. Deeper than the ash of the end of things, is the truth of forgiveness, of opportunity, of flickering new life

Carrying his cross, Jesus falls. He lies face down in the dust of a Jerusalem street And so, God leaves the imprint of his own touch, his own face, in all dust, in all ashes.

Out of the unmaking, new making. Out of what seemed irreparably broken, a new covenant, healing, and hope². Out of the ash, new fire.

The ashes we are using today, are made of last year's palm crosses, - the dreams and hopes of the year, however broken and battered they may have become – mixed with a tiny bit of this year's Christmas tree – the love that shares new birth with us, mixed again with the holy oil of healing.

Because this cross of love we shall receive

Reminds us of our need, and of the needs of those around us, opening our hearts to the giving and receiving of love.

And is also a sign of living hope – and a reminder of the way home, and the one who waits for us, naming us Beloved.

² With many thanks to Nicola Slee, in her book *Sabbath*, p.70

Because ... When someone sets out to find themselves, they are also seeking God - When someone sets out to find God, they are also finding themselves.

For God and we were never meant to be separate.

Let us this Lent, find our way home...

.... whatever our Lenten fast or discipline – let us re-find the treasures that bless rather than consume... re-pent, and redirect our gaze to Love itself.

Let us fall in love once more with he who loves us beyond the wilderness, beyond the cross, beyond the dawning.... for in finding him, we will also re-find ourselves...

You can't get much more down to earth than an ash cross, dust to dust....
Nothing more practical than star-dust, joining us to the glory of the heavens....

- in the words of Fr. Pedro Arrupe,

*Nothing is more practical than
finding God, than
falling in Love
in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination,
will affect everything.
It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read,
whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what fills you with joy and gratitude,
Fall in Love,
stay in love,
and it will decide everything³.*

³ Attributed to Fr. Pedro Arrupe, cited in Pope Francis *A Gift of Joy and Hope*, p. 24