Reflection on Being a People, Pope Francis, February 10th 2021 prepared by Sr Marie

Opening words: This week, we have a transcript. We are no longer providing video resources every week but may continue to create these important seasons of the year. We have attached some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation.

If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate in our homes at 7.30pm on Wednesday. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: *Eternal God,* through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: Last month I used two books of Pope Francis for our meditation. I did not really do justice to the second one 'Let us Dream' so will pick up from where I left off. The book is a three part narrative contemplate-discern- propose. First a look at reality however uncomfortable, above all the truth of the suffering in the margins of society. Second, discern the different forces at work, distinguishing what builds up from what destroys, what humanizes from what dehumanizes and thus choose what is of God, rejecting the opposite. Finally, propose fresh thinking and concrete steps that stem from the diagnosis of what ails us and how we might act differently.

Rob, in his meditation last week mentioned that we need to do two things, one of which is to move forward together towards transformation of our hearts and liberation. This is what Pope Francis is proposing.

According to Austin Ivereigh, Pope Francis' biographer, there are two related areas of Francis' thinking on unity in action that have been in many ways his life project and the key to his spiritual leadership. One was the question of how we forge unity from tension holding together differences to make them fruitful rather than letting them fall into contradiction. The other was about the catalysing effect of the awareness of being God's people and how a people organises on the basis of that awareness. Francis is convinced that true change comes about not from above but from the margins where Christ lives.

Pope Francis writes in the last chapter of his book, "In times of crisis and tribulation, when we are shaken out of our sclerotic habits, the love of God comes out to purify us, to remind us that we are a people. *"Once we were not a people; but now we are God's people."* (1Peter 2:10). The closeness of God calls us together. The poet Tagore writes "*Thou hast brought the distance near and made a brother of the stranger."* This time for action asks us to recover our sense of belonging, the knowledge that we are part of a people.

What does it mean to be a people? It is a thought category….. as a particular story that makes a universal truth tangible and visible. The mythical category of the 'people' draws on and expresses many sources: historic,

linguistic, cultural, but above all a collective wisdom and memory. A people that is held together by that memory, treasured in history, customs, rites and other bonds that transcend the purely transactional and rational.

At the beginning of the story of every people is a quest for dignity and freedom, a history of solidarity and struggle. Just as a people comes to an awareness of its shared dignity in times of struggle, in war and hardship, so too, a people can forget that awareness. A people can become oblivious to its own history. In times of peace and prosperity, there is always the risk that the people might dissolve into a mere mass, with no unifying principle to bind them.

When this happens, the centre lives at the expense of the margins, people divide into competing tribes, and the exploited and disrespected might burn with resentment at the injustices. Rather than thinking of ourselves as members of a people, we have competition for dominance, turning contrapositions into contradictions….signs that a people has lost awareness of its dignity. It has ceased to believe in itself….'

Pope Francis continues: 'We must not let the current clarifying moment pass us by. Let it not be said, in years to come, that in response to the coronavirus crisis we failed to act to restore the dignity of our people, to recover our memory and to remember our roots.

The feeling of being part of a people can only be recovered in the same way as it was forged: in shared struggle and hardship. The people is always the fruit of a synthesis of an encounter, of a fusion of disparate elements that generates a whole which is greater than its parts. A people may have profound disagreements and differences, but they can walk together inspired by shared goals and so create a future. Classically, a people gathers itself in assemblies and organizes. It shares experiences and hopes and it hears the call of a common destiny.

To know ourselves as a people is to be aware of something greater that unites us, something that cannot be reduced to a shared legal or physical identity. We saw this in the protests in reaction to the killing of George Floyd, when many people who otherwise did not know each other took to the streets to protest, united by a healthy indignation. Such moments reveal not just popular feeling but the feeling of a people, its 'soul'. For in spite of the constant social erosions, there persists in all peoples reserves of fundamental values: the struggle for life, from conception to natural death, the defence of human dignity, a love of freedom, a concern for justice and creation, the love of family and fiesta.

Because we can speak of the soul of a people, we can speak of a way of viewing the world, an awareness. Such an awareness is the result of a personality shaped in key moments of a people's history. These milestones have imprinted on the people a powerful sense of solidarity, of justice, of the importance of labour. A people then, is not merely the sum of individuals. It is a living reality that is the fruit of a shared integrating principle.

If, faced with the challenge not just of this pandemic but of all the ills that afflict us at this time, we can act as a single people, life and society will change for the better. This is not just an idea but a call to each of us, an invitation to abandon the self-defeating isolation of individualism, to flow out from my own little 'lagoon' into the broad river of a reality and destiny of which I am part, yet which at the same time is beyond me.

If we are to come out of this crisis better, we have to recover the knowledge that as a people we have a shared destination. The pandemic has reminded us that no one is saved alone. What ties us to each other is what we commonly call solidarity. Solidarity is more that acts of generosity, important as these are; it is the call to embrace the reality that we are bound by bonds of reciprocity. On this solid foundation we can build a better, different, human future. Solidarity is not the sharing of crumbs from the table, but to make space at the table for everyone. The dignity of the people calls for communion: for the sharing and multiplying of goods and for the participation of all for the sake of all.

The problem is not feeding the poor or clothing the naked, or visiting the sick, but rather recognising that the poor, the naked, the sick, the prisoners and the homeless have the dignity to sit at our table, to feel 'at home' among us, to feel part of the family. This is the sign that the Kingdom of Heaven is in our midst. By making the integration of the poor and the care of our environment central to society's goals, we can generate work while humanizing our surroundings. By providing a universal basic income, we can free and enable people to work for the community in a dignified way. By adopting more intensive permaculture for growing food, we can regenerate the natural world, create work and biodiversity and live better.

All this means having common-good goals for human development rather than the false assumption of the infamous trickle-down theory that a growing economy will make us all richer. By focusing on land, lodging and labour we can regain a healthy relationship with the world and grow by serving others. In this way we transcend the narrow individualist framework of the liberal paradigm without falling in the trap of populism. Democracy is then reinvigorated by the concerns and wisdom of the people who are involved in it. Politics can once again be an expression of love through service. By making the restoration of our people's dignity the central objective of the post-Covid world, we make everyone's dignity the key to our action. To guarantee a world where dignity is valued and respected through concrete actions is not just a dream but a path to a better future."

Beginning Meditation: As I come to meditate, I take a few moments to reflect on my mood. What has happened today, yesterday? Have I been able to feel the Lord's presence close to me, or has he seemed a long way away? Whatever I feel, I am here now, hoping to hear him speak to me through the worlds I have read. To help me be more receptive, I take a couple of deep breaths, then breathe normally. I may like to focus my attention on a favourite object, or perhaps a favourite refrain or perhaps the flickering of a candle.

25-minute meditation

Post Meditation reading: Hope

When the storm has passed
And the roads are tamed
and we are the survivors
of a collective shipwreck.

With tearful heart
and our destiny blessed
We will feel joy
simply for being alive.

And we'll give a hug
to the first stranger
And praise our good luck
that we kept a friend.

And then we'll remember
all that we lost
and finally learn
everything we never learned.

And we'll envy no one
for all of us have suffered.

And we'll not be idle
but more compassionate.

We'll value more what belongs to all
than what was earned
We'll be more generous
and much more committed.

We'll understand how fragile
it is to be alive
We'll sweat empathy
for those still with us and those who are gone.

We'll miss the old man
who asked for a pound in the market
whose name we never knew
who was always at your side.

And maybe the poor old man
Was your God in disguise.
But you never asked his name

Because you never had the time.

And all will become a miracle
And all will become a legacy.
And we'll respect the life,
The life we have gained.

When the storm passes
I ask you Lord, in shame
That you return us better
As you once dreamed us.
Alexis Valdes, 'Esperanza' (2020)

Closing prayer: Lord, Father of our human family, you created all human beings equal in dignity: pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter, dialogue, justice and peace. Move us to create healthier societies and a more dignified world, a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war. May our hearts be open to all the peoples and nations of the earth. May we recognise the goodness and beauty you have sown in each of us, and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects, and shared dreams. Amen

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay well and stay safe.

Resources: *Let us Dream*, Pope Francis, December 2020
Alexis Valdes, "Esperanza" (2020) English translation by America Valdes, Nilo Cruz and Alexis Valdes for *Let us Dream*
Image from Pixabay







Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.