



**First Sunday of Lent B**  
**February 18, 2018**

**Awakening to God's Abiding Presence**

This past summer while back in Ireland, I visited a small bookstore in the Cathedral where I was ordained in 1972. I purchased a book called *A Life to Live - Awakening to God's Abiding Presence* by Fr. Jim O'Connell, a priest who spent many years in Africa with the Mill Hill Fathers.

**Rushing through life causes us not to notice God's presence**

In his introduction to his book, Fr. Jim tells the following amazing story.

On a cold January morning in 2007, a youngish man entered a metro station in Washington, DC, and stood near the wall inside the station. He was wearing jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a baseball cap. From a small case, he carefully removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he threw some change into it and began to play.

At a metro station it is not unusual to find a musician performing, but this was a performance with a difference. The musician played six famous pieces of classical music in a performance that lasted around forty-five minutes. During the performance, over one thousand people entered the station, most of them on their way to work. Only seven people stopped and listened for a short while. Among them was one person who recognized the musician and she threw \$20 into the case on the ground in front of him. Twenty-six others gave money, bringing the total in the open case to \$32. The musician finished playing and there was silence. No one noticed and no one applauded. The violinist was Joshua Bell, "one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing some of the most elegant music ever written, on one of the most valuable violins ever made." Two days earlier, he played the same music at a sell-out concert in Boston, where the tickets cost \$100.

*The Washington Post* newspaper had arranged Joshua Bell's performance at the metro station. He was playing a violin that was handcrafted by Antonio Stradivari in 1713. It had been acquired by Bell at a cost that was reported to be in the region of \$3.5 million.

What happened in Washington that January morning makes one wonder how much we miss as we rush through life. We are left to ponder the great need to be more reflective and more in tune with the beauty and mystery around us. In the busy, hectic lives we live, we can miss the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field of our daily living. Of course people have to work and get things done, but it is unfortunate when too much haste and too much activity close out the deeper aspects of life that are revealed in music, poetry, art, creation, friendship and religious faith. Any or all of these can awaken the heart and help one to engage with mystery - the mystery of God. But it calls for time and effort on our part. St. Augustine wrote: "What calls for all our efforts in this life is the healing of the eye of the heart, with which God is to be seen."

We may or may not be aware of it as we rush through life, but God is always with us: "*Invoked or not invoked, God is present.*" We have, each of us, a life to live in God's abiding presence. If we are lucky enough to grow up in a loving family, our hearts are awakening to an awareness of this from the beginning. But some of us only come to such awareness in adult life when we awaken to the abiding presence of God in what is there before our eyes in daily life. It can happen suddenly or it can take a lifetime. However long it takes, the God we meet and see is the same God. It does not really matter whether it happens earlier or later in life. This is the lesson of the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16). Those who come late receive the same pay, the same reward, as those who had begun work much earlier in the day. This may not be strictly just in our eyes, but it is God's way of doing things; such boundless generosity flows from "the loving kindness at the heart of our God, who visits us like the dawn from on high" (The Benedictus).

**Reflection:** What spoke to you most in the above meditation?

## **Rooted in the ordinary. God is present in the kitchen just as much as in the chapel.**

In this beautiful meditation, Fr. Jim writes:

Many writers stress the importance of “finding God in the ordinary,” in the lives we live. For Teresa of Avila, God was present in the kitchen as well as in the chapel. In fact, helping with the washing up had a special place in her scheme of things; she often recommended it for people who claimed to have visions and revelations. Therese of Lisieux developed the theory of ‘the little way’ which involved giving full and loving attention to whatever task is at hand, however humble it may be. Ruth Burrows, a Carmelite sister and one of the great spiritual writers of our time, stresses that “Holiness has to do with the ordinary things.”

Jean Vanier returns time and again to the need to be rooted in the ordinary. In his book, *The Broken Body*, we read:

The basis of true human life is a rooting in the earth, faithful relationships, fidelity to those to whom we are bonded in love, carrying one another’s burdens, sharing with them their joy and their pain. It is compassion and forgiveness. Small is truly beautiful. Jesus spent thirty gently loving years with Joseph and Mary, teaching us about being rooted, about a sense of belonging and forming community. Nazareth is our school of life, teaching us to live humbly in the presence of God, to work with our hands, to welcome people as they are, with their gifts and their hurts, to walk in truth, to open our hearts to people and to nature. And in all of this, our model is Joseph, Mary and Jesus in Nazareth. They teach us what it means to be human.

The thirty gentle, loving years that Jesus spent in Nazareth have special significance. For his friends and neighbours, Jesus was simply the son of Joseph and Mary; his true identity as the Son of God was well hidden; nobody suspected anything. Few could believe he was the Messiah, precisely because he was so ordinary, so unlike what people imagined God to be. They were looking for the Messiah, but he did not live up to their expectations. In many ways, you could say he was too immersed in the ordinary things we take for granted. He was the carpenter’s son from Nazareth and lived like everyone else, in the most ordinary circumstances.

His life in Nazareth is often referred to as ‘the Hidden Life’ of Jesus - because it was lived in such a quiet and apparently uneventful manner. We find total surprise and wonder later. People were asking about the wisdom that had been granted to him, and they were amazed at the miracles that he worked: “This is the carpenter’s son, surely? Is not his mother the woman

called Mary?” (Mt 13:55). They simply saw the son of the carpenter and the child of Mary living an ordinary, even obscure life in which his true identity was hidden.

During his public life, his listeners “were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (Lk 4:21). But those lips were silent for thirty years - as far as the public was concerned; there is only one recorded sentence from that period: “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s interests?” (Lk 2:49). Luke pulls back the veil for a few seconds and Jesus then returned to the ordinary daily life at Nazareth, where the stream of love continued to flow between the Father and himself in an outwardly uneventful life. We can learn a lesson from the life in Nazareth: Jesus teaches us to treasure ordinary life as the place to live our lives in God’s abiding presence. Holiness is rooted in the ordinary and is open to everybody.

*I weave into my life this day,  
the presence of God upon my way.  
I weave into the darkest night,  
strands of God all shining bright.  
I weave into each deed that’s done,  
joy and hope of the Risen Son.*  
(An Irish prayer)

**Reflection:** What spoke to you most in the above meditation?

## **Restless for God**

Fr. Jim writes further:

It is not surprising that Evelyn Underhill (and others) used the image of migration to describe our journey to God. As she saw it, we have an inner instinct or restlessness that draws us like a magnet deeper and further into the mystery of God. There is a deep desire for God in the human heart – planted there by God. It is like having one’s own ‘inner radar’ - an inner longing, thirst and craving for God that leads to a relentless quest.

The psalmist prayer: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps 42). St. Augustine summed it up in his prayer: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” St. John of the Cross was “fired with love’s urgent longings” as he craved for a union of love with God. He stressed that it is for this we were created and for this we are always hungering: “The heart is dissatisfied with anything less than God; it was for this goal of love that we were created.” Nothing less than a union of love with God will ‘satisfy the heart.’

Old myths and legends express it this way: they that before we were born God kissed and caressed our souls. That left a permanent mark, an imprint of a love so deep and pure that we go through life wanting to return to the original experience of such tender love. The memory of God's kiss and caress has created a sacred space deep inside our hearts that is personal and precious. It is the place where our inner instincts, our restlessness, our desire for God are all deeply rooted.

*Look into the depths of your heart and ask yourself: do you have a heart that desires something great, or a heart that has been lulled to sleep by things? Has your heart preserved the restlessness of seeking? God awaits you; God seeks you.*

(Pope Francis)

**Reflection: What spoke to you most in the above**

Have a blessed Lent,

*Fr. Aaron*