



Turning Lockdown into a Retreat Week 6

What is beginning?

As a retreat comes to an end, a useful question to ask is 'what is beginning?' What have you seen or understood afresh through these weeks of lockdown and of retreat? What have you done differently – whether by force of circumstances or by choice? And what has God been doing?

As much as we long more intensely to be free of the constraints of lockdown – to hug those we love, to party, to travel and to work without fear and without limit - many of us are also afraid of losing what we have gained or glimpsed. Some part of us recognizes truth and life when we meet it:

- A new pattern for how we might live as a family
- The surprise of deeper connections with neighbours in a time when we are kept apart
- The simplicity of taking time to be present to trees and stars and birds and weather
- The discovery of a part of who we are that is as yet un-lived – and we want to explore further.
- The realization that there is more to us than is summed up by our role or our work
- A restlessness or dissatisfaction that hints at the 'more' our life might be
- A new found intimacy with God
- A desire to make a difference to our world by the life we live

What's beginning? You probably won't know at this point where it will lead you or how it will make the shape of your life different if you dare to go with it. A seed is planted. What will it become?

Seeds fell into the life of Francis of Assisi: his dissatisfaction with the life of his youth, the breaking down of his former dreams, a cross in a ruined church that seemed to speak to him, a meeting with lepers where what was bitter became sweet. Francis' response was to 'delay a little': to stay with the questions rather than bury them; to avoid the temptation to attempt to pick up the life he had formerly lived; to act on what he was given to see even if the whole picture of where his life was going wasn't clear.



Ask God to help you gather, contemplate and nurture the seeds that have fallen into your ground over these weeks

The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come. [Mark 4. 26-29]

It is said that at the heart of Francis' prayer was the question:

Who are you God, and who am I?

Perhaps more than a question it was a stance – a way to hold himself open to be transformed by continually gazing at God. He looked at the leper; he gazed at the image of the naked Christ in the ruined church of San Damiano. His heart was filled with mercy.

Here is a way of prayer that Clare of Assisi, Francis' most faithful companion, shared with those in her community. You may want to enlarge this image or look up 'San Damiano Cross' online.



Gaze: To gaze is to fix one's attention in one place, but in a relaxed way. Rest your eyes on the image and let it still you. If your eyes or thoughts are drawn elsewhere, gently bring them back to the picture.

Consider: As you gaze, consider what is before you. What strikes you in what you see? What do you understand about Christ through it? Are there any ways you sense some challenge or invitation for you? You may find you don't so much have a thinking response as a feeling response: what are you feeling – can you give it a name? You may find there are there things you want to say to God, or that you sense God in some way speaking to you.

Contemplate: Remain gazing attentively. Relax into the image. Rather than being active in your observation and thinking by trying to identify new insights, look to be



ST AUGUSTINE'S
COLLEGE OF THEOLOGY

present to what you have already thought or felt and let God, if God chooses, take you more deeply into these.

This is a time of simply being there, present to God as God is present to you.

Preparing for Pentecost:

The Holy Spirit stirs in our own spirit. As you look forward to Pentecost Sunday, what desires are awakening in your spirit? What grace or gift do you want to ask God for?

Some Bible passages for prayer and reflection:

Acts 1. 12-14; John 20. 19-23; Isaiah 49. 1-17; Isaiah 61. 1-4; Mark 4. 26-32; Psalm 126