

IMAGINATION, PLEASE!

A very young woman and man are gazing down on their newborn child. Their faces are full of awe and wonder, full of delight and total satisfaction. This is the picture I recently saw, two young parents and their child. Is this the image of the child that Jesus holds up as a sign of the kingdom of heaven? I love gazing into the eyes of a newborn baby – there is the depth of eternity in their eyes. They seem to still remember from where they came. It is before the competitiveness, the insecurity to prove oneself and the constant need to be reassured set in. It is also before the child is swept into the consumeristic world of the need to identify oneself by acquiring more and bigger things, things outside of them and outside relationships.

A child can play in a sandbox, can use empty boxes to build a new world. Their world is simple. Why do our worlds become so complicated? We seem to lose our contentment with the world God has given us – the beauty and wonder of nature, the value of good friends, the ability to share what we have with brothers, sisters and all those in need? We turn a world of plenty into a world of scarcity. Jesus, in the gospels, keep directing us to seek another, a simpler way. Today's culture puts all the reliance on oneself to find meaning alone. The way of faith puts one's faith, confidence, trust, in a force and energy beyond us which we find together. We call this power beyond us the Divine.

One way helpful in recovering the wonder of childhood and a simpler life, is to become more creative, imaginative, wonder-filled people again. There are two ways that I follow. The first is to get back into harmony with nature; we are not here on earth to dominate, control and amass all creation but to be in union with creation, with each other, with myself, and with God. And we can begin with all of creation which teaches us so much.

I love the words of Job to his accusers and I can hear these words addressed to all of us. "Ask the beasts and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In God's hand is the life every living thing, and the breath of ever Being." (Book of Job 12:7-10). Our culture is really out of sync with such a belief. Rather, we are taught the ways of greed, accumulation, consumerism, build bigger and better than my neighbor. Our imagination can show us another way.

Monastic Scribe LXXiv: June 7, 2024

Yes, we can talk with animals; yes they have feeling; yes they can teach us many things. The Celtic Saints give many examples of oneness with the created world.

The second area that abets simplification and imagination is how we use the great gift of our mind. The liberal arts curricular are dying. Some lament the “dumbing of America.” Many young people seek jobs with computers. This is fine but machines can give us facts; they do not help us to think and imagine. Years ago, the great Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel counseled all of us to be reading two books at a time – one serious and the other, a playful, imaginative book, a novel. Our right brain can atrophy when it is not fed with novels, poetry, music, games, sport, dancing, art and architecture. Jesus said that unless we become like little children, we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. We need a child’s playfulness, its sense of awe and wonder. Smart phones and other devices can support our growth in knowledge but they also can inhibit the growth of the Imagination. Reading the Bible needs imagination as the texts are full of stories, myths, poetry and Old Testament types. In monastic *lectio divina* this is formative reading in contrast to ordinary informative reading such as a text book or newspaper.

All this also applies to our life of worship in churches and synagogues. Is it little wonder that many are bored with public worship? They give it up or choose their own spiritual path based on what appeals to them. People need beauty to uplift us. So much of church art, music and decorum is retrograde European. Native peoples often have more lively worship with authentic indigenous art and music. Maybe it starts with the fact that we had become accustomed to quiet and passive worship. But music is not a frill for worship; it is an essential part of it. The biblical religions all pray the psalms which are meant to be sung. Reading the Bible needs imagination as the texts are full of stories, myths, poetry and Old Testament types. In monastic *lectio divina* this is formative reading in contrast to ordinary informative reading such as a text book or newspaper. Good sculpture, art, color, and bodily expression are also all part of a more imaginative approach to religion.

Along with paying attention to what we read and look at, there is always need for silence in our daily lives. Only with a habit of silence can we really listen to the deeper sounds of life, of reality, of God. There is so much to learn, so much that is there to inspire us. Smart phones have their place but not as you are walking in a park or sitting still. We have eyes to see, and ears to hear, and noses to smell, and everything to touch but we have to be still and listen to it all. In a train station or

Monastic Scribe LXXiv: June 7, 2024

airport or just walking in the city, I behold the great variety of people: how they move, talk, exude joy or fatigue. So much of wonder before me. I echo Louie Armstrong's song, "What a Wonderful World."

Have you learned any of this on your own and chosen to live more imaginably and creatively? You can let us know at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.