**Preparing in peace for Christmas: taking time for holy pauses**

 *Be still and aware of God’s presence within and around*

When I taught young children I really enjoyed it all: the nativity plays, the tearful angel having an accident, the tinsel, cotton wool, glitter everywhere, old fashioned party games, anticipation.. much of which doesn’t happen today rather sadly. Toilet roll Santas aren’t allowed. The ever increasing commercialisation is disturbing: Christmas doesn’t mean time out – the pace continues, service is expected to continue in shops and restaurants – the pressures for the latest gadgets, the sophisticated toys, the clothes with the right labels on, the amount of money spent on the unnecessary. Our society pretends to take the environment seriously but what mixed messages at this time of year. And no peace in that land we call Holy. I long to go away and find a secret place to hide until its over! We all value silence and stillness, or we wouldn’t be here – how can we find it at this time of year? It’s about more than finding time to remember others – it’s about ensuring that the silence within is maintained, not being pulled in every direction with nothing done well.

Making space for the holy pauses in the day: pockets of quiet prayer, anywhere we can. We know the story of Brother Laurence, a lay brother at the Parisian Carmelites in 1666, and the baker in the monastery, he was never hasty or loitering but was with an even, uninterrupted composure and tranquillity of spirit. ‘*In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things (of me) I possess God in as great a tranquillity as if I were on my knees at the blessed sacrament.’* How does he do this? Will we manage this over Christmas time?! In his book, *The Practice of the Presence of God,* [Dover Publications, 2005] he explains: *‘This practice of the Presence of God is somewhat hard at the outset, yet pursued faithfully, it works imperceptibly in the soul marvellous effects; it draws down God’s grace abundantly, and leads the soul insensibly to the ever-present vision of God, loving and beloved, which is the most spiritual and real, the most free and most life-giving manner of prayer….(So) be not disheartened from your many falls; truly this habit can only be formed with difficulty, yet when it is formed, how great will be your joy therein!*

David Cole in *The Art of Peace* [Bible Reading Fellowship] advises not giving up; the spiritual practice becomes a habit, and becomes who you are, even when we don’t feel we are good at it – as I have shared before. He suggests ‘meditate momentarily’ – at the traffic lights, in the queue, taking a tiny moment for a Holy Pause. If we watch a pianist or conductor at a concert for example, they always take that moment, to stop and still themselves before the performance starts. At this busy time of year there are likely to be many occasions when we need to do that. Even if our family is small, not nearby, or no longer with us, it is hard to escape the frenetic activity – a supermarket visit takes one into a world of bustle and noise.

I am writing this on a train in Thailand, from Chang Mai in the north through the most peaceful countryside, and we have been struck by the calmness around – the taxi driver in busy Bangkok, the waiter in the busy restaurant, teachers out with large classes of tiny children, all calm and smiling. The woman who helped us with our cases, smiling, found our seats (carriage 2 was in fact 1!) who we took to be an attendant, until she smilingly took to her seat. Does the fact that each engagement begins and ends with the greeting – you and me, together – a moment is taken to acknowledge and take time to recognise even a stranger...and to smile!

So let us endeavour to keep up our practice, even when challenging, or when we feel lonely, or maybe it is hard to be motivated, to make time for our daily quiet time. And so, in the middle of it all, to take holy pauses, and sustain our inner silence, remembering this time of new birth and to keep peace in our own portion of this disturbed and disturbing world. And maybe remember the wise words of Brother Roger of Taizé**:** ‘*I have nothing to say, because God speaks much better than me.’*

**Leading into the silence**

In expectant silence the world awaits
the coming of a child
heralding a world of peace
hope
love
and
joy.

In the quiet of dawning light
I await morning streaming rose and gold
threads of glory
filling the sky
with the promise
of a new day
born in the darkness
of the night

silence descends
light enters

I feel the breath of God
awakening my soul
with fluttering wings
I become an oasis
of peace
hope
love
and
joy.

*In expectant silence*Louise Gallagher

**Leading from the silence**

The stillness of God be mine this night that I may sleep in peace. The awareness of the angels be mine this night that I am alert to unseen mysteries The company of saints be mine this night that I may dream of the river of love. The life of Christ be mine this night that I may be truly alive in the morning. That I may be truly alive.

*Evening prayer*from*Celtic Benedictions*