

A Hug from God

There is an ancient method of reading the Bible called *Lectio Divina*. We are encouraged to read a passage of Scripture slowly, several times, allowing the words to descend into his or her mind. It is the complete opposite of the speed-reading for information we usually employ and which we then also use reading the Bible. Reading slowly, eventually a verse or a phrase begins to light up for us or, as we sometimes say, it leaps from the page. Probably the old monks would not have been happy with that expression because in contemplation, with or without the Bible, nothing leaps. It is better described as quietly allowing the word from the Lord to fill our awareness. Stay with the phrase or sentence, they taught, until it sinks into the heart and eventually transforms us. They have another name for this sacred reading and it is, "The Embrace of God". There is a meeting between the God who loves us and ourselves. He is the One who takes the initiative.



St. Benedict taught his brothers *Lectio Divina*

Does God really embrace us; give us a hug, so to speak? To some this may sound a little presumptuous or slightly irreverent. Jesus told a wonderful story. In it the father, losing all his dignity, runs to meet his returning son who, to say the least, has blown it. Instead of a stern lecture, which we would say the son deserved, he puts his arms around him and hugs him. This is a picture of our heavenly Father. The hugs are certainly there in Scripture.

Recently we visited Paxton House in the Borders. We were in need of a cup of tea and had noticed a sign indicating that only a mile away this stately home had a cafeteria. The house is situated in a beautiful setting overlooking the River Tweed. Banks of snowdrops carpeted the sides of the roads. The stables had been converted into a self-service restaurant. On one side of the room there were the stalls where horses had been stabled. In each of these there was a bench with seats on either side. In the remaining space in the old stables and by the windows there were tables. We unhesitatingly went to a place in the open. Every other person that came in chose to be hidden in a stall. Somehow it seemed indicative of today's isolationist society trailing loneliness in its wake.

What of us, who know God, or say that we do? The embrace of God transforms us just as the hug of his father altered the life of the younger son. The older brother standing moodily watching the scene of reconciliation continued on his self-righteous and resentful path. There can be a deliberate turning away from the heavenly Father but for many of us this isn't the problem. We simply don't find time for that hug from God.

“One of the greatest hindrances to a life of prayer is the multiplicity of our lives; being spent and torn in so many directions outside of God’s loving Providence. We go to prayer and all the things we need to do or have forgotten to do pop into our heads.”ⁱ “Learning to let go can lift many of the burdens off our shoulders as we learn to trust in God like a little child for our every need.”ⁱⁱ On the night before he died Jesus called his disciples, “My children”.ⁱⁱⁱ He loved them and he loves us. What did Jesus do with the little children? He hugged them. “Then Jesus took the little children in his arms, put his hands on them, and blessed them.”^{iv}

As we rest in the Heavenly Father’s embrace, wordlessly “we take all those that we love into God’s presence with us”.^v On Holy Island, when the tide is open, crowds stream over the causeway. Full of centuries of history, the Parish Church, another St Mary’s, attracts many visitors. There is a board where prayer requests may be pinned. Each day, at Evensong, these are read out. Often they are full of human need although occasionally there is a thanksgiving. The scraps of paper are then taken to the altar and remain there until the morning. There is something symbolic in that act, as if the person who wrote that request and those whom they name are held in the embrace of God.

“All you nations, praise the Lord.
All you people praise him
Because the Lord loves us very much.”^{vi}

ⁱ There will be Joy in the Morning. Sister Joyce Pranger.

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ⁱⁱⁱ John 13:33 NCV

^{iv} Mark 10:16 NCV

^v St Teresa of Avila

^{vi} Psalm 117 NCV