

Homily for the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

The author of the first reading is struggling with the enigmas of life – the questions for which he can't find answers, and every time he seems to find an answer it leads to other questions. So he concludes that everything is vanity – ultimately just a waste of time. To many, that's how it looked before the coming of Christ.

The second reading is written in the light of Jesus and his victory over sin and death, which means that ultimately everything *is* worthwhile. And so the Church, in our own day, is able to say: "All the good fruits of human nature, and all the good fruits of human enterprise, we shall find again, cleansed and transfigured." In other words, nothing that is precious to us, lovely, good or true, is ever lost to us!

So the first reading is about the stark reality of life's mysteries, and the second is about the consolation of our faith. I think our prayer-life can be helped if we allow ourselves to experience both - both the agony and the ecstasy.

I shall share with you a three-fold movement that might help you do this. From start to finish it is reality therapy.

Before the mystery of life, the wonder of it, and the questions we can't answer, we can be led to say "O Mysterious God, I adore you.

Before the wonderful outcome that has been revealed in Christ, making everything worthwhile, we are led to say: "O Wonderful God, I thank you".

Before our own failure to be faithful, and the revelation of God's marvelous mercy, we say: "O Merciful God, I entrust myself to you".

So let's go back over these three movements in a little more detail.

First movement: the mystery that leads to adoration: we see extraordinary beauty around us, in nature and in people's lives. We see the intricacies and complexities of our own nature and of all nature. Whether we are looking at the tiniest dimensions of nature through microscopes, or the vastness of the universe through telescopes, it all leads to amazement and awe, and today scientists are among those who acknowledge this. On top of all that, there is the beauty and goodness we can see in people – in love's sacrifices, in children's smiles, in forgiveness, in beauty in music... We need to savour this for its own sake, but also because it sets us up for our first shock. It all comes out of a choice God didn't have to make. Each one of us is part of something that might never have existed!

And even given that it does, any one of us might have missed out – there were over a million others who could have come into existence the moment I did – they didn't and never will. To take the world's existence, and our own existence within it, for granted, as if it were not all gift, is to live in unreality. We need to let reality hit us.

The next shock: in the midst of all that is beautiful and wonderful, there is also evil in all its kinds – injustice, atrocities, cruelties, tragedies, and everything that scripture means by "the mystery of

iniquity". The existence of evil is not just a fact; it's a fact that should disturb us. It, too, is part of the world God chose to create. We need to ask why – even though God didn't owe us our existence in the first place, and isn't answerable to us either!

The mystery deepens yet again when we find that God allows himself to be caught up in the dynamics of evil. Isn't that what's involved in the Incarnation, suffering and unjust death of Jesus. God didn't need this either. Why indeed?

Let yourself be struck by the great mystery of creation; linger with the questions; allow yourself to feel the burden of not understanding, but knowing that God does, until you feel compelled to say the only things you can say: "O mysterious God, I adore You".

But then, in a second movement we look at the ultimate outcome of all history and the difference Christian revelation makes. The second reading reflects our destiny to share in Jesus' glory, his victory and his joy. We transition from "everything is a waste of time and vanity" to "everything is wonderfully worthwhile." Have you wondered about the joy Jesus must have felt on the morning of his resurrection? And allowed yourself to feel glad that this is what He wants to share with you?

So what about all the suffering? A good place to start is in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed "Father, please find some other way...however, not mine but your will be done." A few years later, the letter to the Hebrews tells us that "even though He was the Son, he learned obedience through suffering". In other words: He chose to accept God's will knowing that being faithful would cost him his life. Then the letter tells us that because of his faithful submission, his prayer was heard, and he was saved – not *from* death, but *out of* death. Death was turned against itself by being made to serve God's purpose. What this reveals is that even the worst that could ever happen doesn't defeat God's purpose, - and that God shares the journey through suffering with us. Is it any wonder our faith assures us that in the end "all really will be well"! Again, linger before this great mystery, until it all seems too wonderful and you want to say: "O Wonderful God, I thank you."

The third movement (cf Ephesians 2:4-10) confronts us with the mystery of our sinning – even knowing the greatness of God's love and wonderful plan, we still sin, and sin again. However, throughout salvation history what is being revealed through our experience of failure and sin is the greatness of God's mercy – a mercy so great that we can afford to abandon ourselves to it completely: "O merciful God, I entrust myself to you."

Each of these three movements is soundly based in the scriptures. But also, this prayer doesn't require us to look away from the world and ordinary life as if these were a distraction from prayer. You look right at the world and at life and see them for what they *really* are, and find yourself in awe of what you are looking at, and what you're part of. And you'll pray more deeply: O mysterious God, I adore you; O wonderful God I thank you; O merciful God I entrust myself to you. Try it! Go and look the world in the eye.