

Reflection from the *'Little Book of Lent'* – an anthology composed by Reverend Canon Arthur Howells (2014, London: Harper Collins) comprising extracts from several of his favourite spiritual writers and reproduced here with his kind permission.

10. Friday, Week Four

For Reflection

Stephen Verney was Canon of St George's Chapel, Windsor and subsequently on the staff of Coventry Cathedral before becoming Bishop of Repton. Throughout his ministry he was much involved in training clergy and lay people in mission and spirituality.

Encountering God

Contemplative prayer begins with having time, making a space for relaxation, so that our agitated minds can grow still and like the surface of a lake can begin to reflect the surrounding trees and mountains. We become aware of nature – of a flower, maybe, or of the falling rain. We become aware of people, of our neighbours, each with a unique personality and expressing a unique goodness and carrying a unique suffering. Our minds are not filled with honey-sweet thoughts, but with the reality in which good and evil, life and death, are interlocked. And as we become aware of the present moment, in all its height and depth and length and breadth, we become aware that through this present we are being approached by a presence. Most vividly do we experience this through ourselves, because I am that which is most immediately present to myself. Out of the reality of myself as I allow it to come into consciousness, out of my anxiety and creativity and joy and pain, out of this mishmash which is me, there is coming to meet me the divine love.

This is the encounter which is at the heart of contemplation. The story which describes it most poignantly is the parable of the prodigal son – of the boy who left home and spent his father's money, and landed up in a foreign country feeding pigs, in a state of degradation, hunger and despair. Then he came to himself and decided to go home. As he came stumbling back, 'while he was still a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.' This is the nature of the encounter, not that I am stumbling towards the Abba Father, but that the Abba Father is running towards me. It is not that I love God, but that God loves me, not that I believe in God, but that God believes in me. The discovery at the heart of contemplation is not that I am contemplating the divine love, but that the divine love is contemplating me. He sees and understands and accepts me, he has compassion on me, he creates me afresh from moment to moment, and he protects me and is with me through death and into the life beyond.

Our contribution to this encounter is to let it happen, to remove obstacles and clear the way. It is something like drawing back your bedroom curtains on a summer morning, and letting the light come into your room. You do not have to search for the light, it is already there, pressing up against the curtains, seeking a way in.

INTO THE NEW AGE
STEPHEN VERNEY

Scripture Reading
St Luke 15:11-24

"He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."

Prayer

Thank you, Father,
for knowing me better than I know myself;
for accepting me just as I am;
for loving me and welcoming me home.

Fill that space within my heart with your presence,
that bathing myself in your light,
I may be a light to others.

Open my eyes to see the way forward for myself,
for the people with whom I live and work.

Open my eyes to you.