

Things to Consider

- ▶ There is no technique that will make the aforementioned a reality in our life as that would be manipulative. It just naturally happens as a result of a well-lived life that actively seeks to live out God's will. As a tree can be shaped by the wind, so God's Holy Spirit can shape us.
- ▶ A simplicity of heart will begin to emerge and as Esther de Waal suggests in *Living with Contradiction*, this means 'that more and more whatever is inessential falls away, and instead prayer becomes increasingly simple and uncomplicated self-surrender – surrender to love'.
- ▶ In all this, a certain wisdom begins to emerge. Wisdom, as we know, is a difficult thing to describe; we just know it when we see it and it need have nothing to do with brilliance and achievement. In fact, it can sometimes be missing with these.
- ▶ James Howell in his book *Conversations with St Francis* has this to say on wisdom, 'Wisdom thinks about the end, the purpose of life. Wisdom can step out of the moment to understand broader implications. Wisdom is patient, centred, not easily thrown off balance, a kind of serenity. Francis consistently acted as if centred by an inner gyroscope, which is why people witnessed a burst of God's glory in him.
- ▶ 'Wisdom is born out of the cauldron of experience: hard times, grief, and sacrifice. You can't just pick up wisdom suddenly, the way you crack open a fortune cookie. You live it, wait on it, test it, let it seep from the good earth through the soles of your feet; you begin to notice you are becoming one with God, who is Wisdom. Francis listened to his life, he paid intense attention to the lives of others, and he could perceive God in it all.
- ▶ 'Wisdom is perception – seeing life, the world, and other people from God's perspective. Constant prayer installed this divine vision in Francis's soul. Assuming God's vantage point, Francis saw beneath the surface of things and took the long view, his eye cocked, looking about for not merely what to think but, most important, what to do.
- ▶ 'We typically think it is important to know God's will, to understand God's will, to make sense of God's will, to question God's will. For Francis everything was much simpler. His prayer was not to fiddle around mentally or intellectually with God's will. His passion was, simply, to do God's will.
- ▶ 'God's will is something we do. We are urged to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1.22). God's will is that we do something. God's desire is that you get in motion, that you act, reach, touch, walk, embrace, lift. For Francis, God's will was not a self absorbed rumination about himself: God's will was about somebody else, a leper, a pauper, a pope, a friend, a stranger. God's will is not speculative, something to be endlessly debated, forever deferring changes in the pattern of our real lives.'
- ➔ So what is the next step you might take? What is the next thing you might do; might you look for God in the next person you meet? Then go on doing this: one step at a time, one person at a time, beginning over when you inevitably fall short.

AtG/B25/MBH

Attending to God

'Mellowness of heart and spirit ...'



In this Brochure I want to explore 'mellowness of heart and spirit', a phrase that comes from Ronald Rolheiser, who sees this as an important dimension to our growing relationship with God. However, this mellowness will only come with the passing of time; perhaps much time.

To understand its meaning it may be helpful to begin with a negative example where this seems to be missing. We have all had occasion to meet a fellow Christian who leaves us feeling a little uneasy even if we cannot pinpoint why. It may be their intensity; or their concern for the 'letter of the law', in the sense that you feel you are being put under the microscope to see whether you pass the test. It may be that you sense their faith is not a lived experience but simply knowing the 'right answers'. There might even be a bitter zeal as we see with that older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. He has done all that his father asked of him and yet we sense his heart was not in it. In making these observations I am not suggesting we be judgemental, but rather, simply noticing what we are witnessing and trying to understand. Mellowness of heart and spirit seems to be missing.

Then we see its opposite in someone and it feels almost life-giving. There is something about this Christian that draws us, helps us feel good about ourself, lifts our spirit. There seems a sense of calm and peace and perhaps even wisdom with them. It feels as if in some way they are looking to a distant horizon which seems connected to God. You sense this mellowness of heart and spirit within them as a lived experience.

So how does this happen? Well firstly, we can't make it happen; we can't say: 'I'm going to be mellow in heart and spirit!' It does not work that way. It is always as a by-product of something else and simply emerges with time as we try intentionally to allow God the Holy Spirit to shape our lives.

That leads to another preliminary: Mellowness of heart and spirit is to be found in an older, not a younger person. In this it is like wisdom and only comes with years of reflected upon lived experience.

Now it needs be said that something of this mellowness might have a natural dimension for it may also emerge in someone who is not a Christian. Partly this is the result of a life lived well and partly from the biology of ageing. But in this brochure I want to explore it in its Christian manifestation which is as a response to God's ever-gentle and gracious calling. For the Christian this wisdom will also have a particular slant compared to the non-Christian.

So what might we see in such a person? I have mentioned a noticeable peace and calm. This is not to say they always feel this, but rather that despite the turmoil on the surface of their life that comes and goes as the matters of the moment touch them, you sense that deep down there is this peace and calm within.

With the passing of time they have developed a reverence for all life: people as well as the surrounding natural world. This reverence is likely to find particular expression through their love of the Eucharist. In fact this will normally be so in someone who has this mellowness of heart and spirit because they see this as an important way to be present to God and so, as a result, reverence comes naturally. Gratitude and joy fill their life.

In varying degrees they can see God's hand at work in the lives of others and the world around them, as well as their own. They try to see Christ in the other; they recognise that in some way we are all 'in Christ' even the worst of us. Of course this 'seeing' is not perfect and at times they can struggle.

These struggles give them sympathy, even empathy for the frailty of others and they are less inclined to be judgemental. 'Live and let-live' might be their motto. There can be an inner tension with this, for justice is equally important to them. Therefore, they can struggle and at times fail and be judgemental. Repentance will always follow.

Perhaps these tensions highlight another aspect. They are more willing to live with paradox whereas a younger person is likely to struggle with this. They do not need to have all the answers and certainties because they recognise the uncertainties and vulnerabilities in life that we all have. We will never have all the answers even to our own narrow interests and specialities. Humility will have a growing role to play in their life, particularly as they ponder the greatness of God, the grandeur of His universe while also paradoxically being intimately interested in them, their life and who knows them better than they know themselves.

There is a zeal in their life but this has nothing to do with fanaticism. They are just deeply committed to God and His transformation of them and this world. They know they have a role in this because God calls us all to be active in this task, although few respond. There is something of a recognition that they can spread themselves too widely and so they will try to focus on that which they believe God is calling them to do. Life is too short to spend much time on the inessentials. Fantasy and self-centredness are lessening.

But that word 'self-centredness' can also point to a danger here highlighting a paradox. They have journeyed far in this pilgrimage. It is not that it has become easy, but rather easier. They have taken Christ's yoke upon them (Matthew 11.28-30). God is very real and present to them. And so complacency (as opposed to contentment) can set in if they are not watchful. They need to remember that even though they have journeyed far, there is still a vast landscape to cross on their journey into God.

Their prayer for themselves might be that of the psalmist: 'Teach us so to number our days: that we apply our hearts to wisdom' (90.12).