



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Just before I rose to leave, idly like a two year old, I reached to pick up an attractive ornament on the shelf beside me. It was one of those shiny polished stone balls that are not even much use as paperweights because they roll around so easily. I held it for a moment and admired the beauty of the stone and then, making to replace it, it slipped. I tried to catch it with my other hand but dropped it as it hit my little finger. After a short pang of pain I noticed that my finger was in an interesting new shape.

Seeing one's own body differently even in a small part like this re-orientates everything in one's perception of the world. Imagine what Resurrection must be like. I was tempted to force it back into its usual position but was wisely advised against it. No one knew which way to push or pull it. The finger throbbed a little but was rigid. However inconvenient, I was helpless and needed help.

I went in search of it at the Accident and Emergency unit of St Mary's Paddington, reassured by the blue plaque on the wall informing us that here Alexander Fleming had discovered penicillin in the year of my birth, a karmic connection perhaps. Like most London hospitals it was homey, a bit tatty not the plate glass and metal hygienic efficiency of television healthcare, but it was friendly. I had to give my name and a few routine proofs of my social existence to an understandably bored form-filler behind a screen papered with so many notices that she was scarcely visible. But I was not asked if I had health insurance or even if I was a British citizen. I was not pampered, rejected or treated as a customer but just accepted as someone in need and put in line with others like me.

Sitting with my kind companion we looked around at the other shades in need. Some were alone, others with many family members. Occasionally eyes met as we looked at each other and wondered what their problem was. Sometimes it was obvious. How vulnerable and transparent we are when our real needs are known to others. The man next to me had his finger in a big bandage. Feeling we were in the same category I asked him if he had broken it. No he had almost sliced it off cutting paper at the office. He was scared and muttered something about being so stupid. Like me, like all of us in need, he felt 'stupid' at the mistakes that land us up like this.

Expecting a long wait we decided to meditate but it was a short prayer ? St Benedict says that

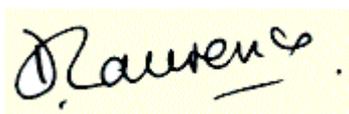
prayer should be short - as my name was called out. The system had remembered me by name! I was triaged and x-rayed in quick order and told to wait again. I was soon lying down in a treatment bay joking with a large bouncy nurse who must have been captain of her school hockey team. She was a pediatric nurse doing extra training. We chatted while she assessed my damage. She could straighten the dislocated finger she said but she was not allowed to yet. A gentle Indian doctor soon arrived, dressed in jeans, no clinical whites, trained for more important things than relocating a bone. I breathed deeply on nitrous oxide and waited for the pain of the wrench but it was hardly noticeable. ?Is that it?? Yes that?s it, no don?t try to move it yet.?

The whole earth is our hospital endowed by the ruined millionaire.

The care was not finished yet. I needed another x-ray to ensure it had worked. My smiling nurse came out to bandage me when a real emergency arrived. A cardiac arrest. The A&E team dropped everything and rushed to their stations like a football team following a secret game plan. They enjoyed using their skills. With the other walking wounded I pressed against the wall while the patient was wheeled in, bare-chested, having CPR, surrounded by those whose absolute sole concern was to save his life, the life of a stranger as we all were until our needs had introduced us. When my nurse eventually returned I asked her how he was. Her face lit up with a benediction. ?We pulled him through?.

Beneath the bleeding hands we feel the sharp compassion of the healer?s art, resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

The nurses and doctors were not pretending to be perfect. The hospital was not a perfect society. If they made mistakes they were accountable. They were healers of their fellow human beings. If only we could see the church simply in the same way.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Laurence Freeman OSB

Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk of the Congregation of Monte Oliveto and also Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation (www.wccm.org)

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