

Homily for John Main Seminar '11 UCC, Sunday 14th August, 2011.

'These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer.' [Isaiah, 56,7.]

Prayer is not something we do; it is something that is done through us. Just as we can turn on our radios and access different stations, so we can attune ourselves to the conversation which at all times takes place in the depths of our hearts. It is the loving conversation between the three persons of the Blessed Trinity who have taken up their abode in us since our baptism. "Do not let your heart be troubled, Jesus tells us; believe in God, and believe in Me. I go to prepare a place for you . . . so that where I am, *there* you may be also . . . I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you . . . Anyone who loves me . . . My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. [You will recognize St John's Gospel, Chapter 14, but do we take it seriously enough?]

So, prayer is not something we have to do, something we have to invent, something we have to articulate in a multitude of words. Prayer is a sound of sheer silence which we hear and to which we accustom our hearts, because it is the language of the Trinity as they whisper their love to one another in the depths of our hearts. We don't have to do anything or say anything. We only have to turn off all other noises and descend into the mineshaft of our still bodies and our quietened minds. These are the initial problems of prayer. How do I calm my body how do I turn off my mind?

Some people use the digital anaesthetic of the rosary, others are trained in age-old techniques such as in the Buddhist tradition. John Main learnt his secret in India: he taught, from then on, the trusty formula of

the mantra. But everyone to their own favourite tube station. It doesn't really matter which entry point you use as long as it leads to the underground. Nor does it matter how you avoid the bushwhacking thugs or the armed robbers in the mind and the body, always lurking in the shadows to waylay the pilgrim climbing down into the depths of the heart. 'Where did the poet learn to settle his mind like that on to one thing? Ted Hughes asks himself. It is a valuable thing to be able to do - but something you are never taught at school, and not many people do it naturally. I am not very good at it, but I did acquire some skill in it. Not in school, but while I was fishing. I fished in still water, in those days, with a float. As you know, all such a fisherman does is stare at his float for hours on end. I have spent hundreds and hundreds of hours staring at a float - a dot of red or yellow the size of a lentil, ten yards away. Those of you, who have never done it, might think it a very drowsy pastime. It is anything but that.

All the little nagging impulses, that are normally distracting your mind, dissolve. They have to dissolve if you are to go on fishing. Once they have dissolved, you enter one of the orders of bliss.

Your whole being rests lightly on your float, but not drowsily: very alert, so that the least twitch of the float arrives like an electric shock. And you are not only watching the float. You are aware, in a horizonless and slightly mesmerized way, like listening to the double bass in orchestral music, of the fish below there in the dark. At every moment your imagination is alarming itself with the size of the thing slowly leaving the weeds and approaching your bait. Or with the world of beauties down there, suspended in total ignorance of you. And the whole purpose of this concentrated excitement, in this arena of apprehension and unforeseeable events, is to bring up some lovely solid thing, like

living metal, from a world where nothing exists but those inevitable facts which raise life out of nothing and return it to nothing' [**Ted Hughes**].

That is what John Main provided us with: a simple but colourful float. We hang it up inside our minds and gaze at it relentlessly until its hypnotic power anaesthetizes our minds like the swinging fob-watch of an expert magician. And then we can escape from the grasp of the Cyclops and lower ourselves into the magic cave of the heart where we 'taste and see that the Lord is good.'

Now while the dark about our loves is strewn,
Light of my dark, blood of my heart, O come!
And night will catch her breath up, and be dumb.

Leave thy father, leave thy mother
And thy brother;
Leave the black tents of thy tribe apart!
Am I not thy father and thy brother,
And thy mother?
And thou--what needest with thy tribe's black tents
Who hast the red pavilion of my heart [**Francis Thompson**].