

Session 2

Living in balance

Stillness

Take a moment to become still as we begin this session: Pay attention to your breathing, without changing the rhythm. Notice your breathing in . . . and your breathing out . . . notice the rhythm . . . the depth . . . the feel of the air entering and leaving your mouth or nose . . . take three deeper breaths . . .

Reading (John 12: 23-26)

Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'

Reflection

This is one of the sayings attributed to Jesus that sounds preposterous. It runs counter to all our instincts, as well as to contemporary psychological insights, to 'hate our life in this world' not to mention the apparent promise that if we hate our life enough, we will get to keep it for ever. Yet this strange warning in today's reading is actually a powerful key to the mystery of what Ignatian spirituality calls detachment. The word detachment can appear to imply a kind of separatist indifference towards the rest of the world and the needs of others. Actually, in terms of spirituality, it means pretty much the opposite of this. It might be better expressed as the art of being at balance with all that happens, so that we are not pulled off track either by triumph or disaster, but able, in the words of Rudyard Kipling, 'to treat those two imposters just the same', by refusing to let them take over our consciousness.

If there is something (or someone) we either inordinately desire to possess or inordinately desire to avoid, such an attachment robs us of our inner freedom, and we can become enslaved by it. God invites us to make choices that are not shaped either by the hope of gain or the fear of loss, but spring from the deepest part of our heart, where God is indwelling.

The secret really is about sitting lightly enough to all created things and circumstances so that we are not seduced by them into making choices contrary to our deepest values. It's about gratefully enjoying these gifts while we have them, but not falling apart if we lose them, so that nothing on earth has the power to undermine our spiritual equilibrium.

Inigo learned this lesson the hard way, through the bitter experience of his own vulnerability and compulsions and even, on occasion, his despair. We are not alone as we walk this rocky road. This reading is also crucial to our journey to transformation because of its striking

image of the seed falling into the ground and dying, before the new life it contains can emerge. We all know from the natural world that this is the way life renews itself, but it is harder to take on board that something in ourselves or in our society or world order, also has to die if we are to be free to move on to the next stage of our journey. To allow this process to happen requires of us that we release our possessive grip on these things sufficiently to allow them to die when the time is right,

In the course of our lives we will have to let a great deal go, including quite possibly our livelihoods, our health, our mobility, our faculties, our financial security, our independence, and, finally, physical life itself. The process of detachment is an ongoing challenge. Jesus warns us about it, but also teaches us how to embrace it and accompanies us through it by experiencing so many human losses in his own earthly life.

Talk to God

Take a long hard look this week at your own life. Is there anything you are clinging to excessively or feel you couldn't live without? Anything you are determined to gain or achieve at all costs? Anything you are afraid of facing to the extent that you make every effort to avoid it? The call to detachment invites you to relax your grip on any earthly goal that is tending to take over your consciousness, and then enjoy the freedom to make your life choices from a point of inner balance.

Sometimes the good can be the enemy of the better. Is there any aspect of your own life that, though it may feel good, needs to be let go, to allow something better to emerge? The experience of global crisis is stripping all of us of many of our previous securities. Is this a time during which our human 'grain of wheat' is falling into the ground and dying? Can you trust that this 'dying' is the necessary pre-condition for the emergence of new life? Could what we see as a threat to our well-being become a way through to our better-being? What are your own hopes for how that human better-being might look?

The last part of today's reading is a very clear instruction: to serve, and to follow. As we move on in our Lenten journey, we will discover more of what it means to serve God and each other, and to follow Jesus in order to walk the path of love. Note that Jesus repeatedly asks us to follow him, not to worship, but to follow, not just to talk, but to walk the talk. What does this call mean to you personally?

Make a note in your journal of anything you have learned from your prayer this week, anything you may be clinging to, or are afraid of, or anything that you feel has, like the seed, died and fallen into the ground.

We might, this week, pray for the grace to recognise and embrace our own vulnerability, trusting that the dying of the seed of all we think we are can release the new growth of all we can become.