

MAKING THE BED

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Do you make your bed in the morning?

This is the question posed by Tish Warren in our Advent book – ‘Liturgy of the Ordinary’ – which I encourage you to read and which forms the basis for our sermons and thinking this Advent.

She uses the idea of making the bed as way into thinking about all of our life as a set of rituals, beginning with those we choose to begin our day with, and how these reflect our priorities but also forms them. The point being made is that these morning rituals shape our whole day. What we do in those first few precious moments expresses who we are and what’s important to us. For this reason, it becomes a worthy object of our attention and perhaps, as a result, worthy of alteration. Most of us know the expression ‘you’ve made your bed, now lie in it!’ as something that means we create the outcomes of our own lives, but it also implies we can make the bed *differently* and so change these outcomes and so change ourselves.

CHURCH LITURGY

In turn, bedmaking is also a metaphor of something else – of liturgy in church, and how we understand these as a set of *mindful* rituals rather than *mindless* rituals. I’m rather struck by her example of a student who said they found the ‘Confessions’ of St Augustine rather boring, only to receive the reply from their teacher that, on the contrary, it wasn’t Augustine who was boring, but the student themselves! From this we might say that church is only as boring as the worshipper taking part. That’s not an excuse for dull worship, but it reminds us that the primary purpose of liturgy isn’t entertainment. It isn’t this week’s episode of our favourite TV programme! Instead it’s a repeated pattern of happenings that are intended to form us as Christians and bring us into community with one another and with God. We repeat the same rituals each week not in order to receive new information, but to embed within us particular ideas and practices at the very deepest level and as carriers of meaning. In the same way, bedmaking every day is essentially a boring and repetitive activity – but if we use ritual intentionally, thoughtfully, as an opportunity for reflection and prayer it becomes a time to treasure and a source of meaning in our lives.

HOME AND CHURCH

The reason for choosing this particular book at this time is because it seeks to make connections between what we do in church and at home. In a year when we've spent a lot more time at home than usual, this theme of domestic spirituality aims to emphasise the home as a place of prayer. My sense, is that amongst the many negatives of pandemic and lockdown, one small positive has been a restoration of praying at home. Far from there being a radical discontinuity between home and church, the author seeks to show how the two are intimately connected, how God comes to us in the intimacy of our daily lives in what the title of the book describes as the 'liturgy of the ordinary'. In other words, there is no situation too normal, too boring or too ordinary, not to be a potential occasion for an encounter with God or to do his will. In all this I am reminded of the famous poem by George Herbert, best known as a hymn that begins 'teach me my God and King/In all things Thee to see/That what I do in anything/To do it as for Thee.' So it is that we can learn to see the sacred in the ordinary in what has been called 'The Sacrament of the Present Moment'.

ALERT TO THE SIGNS OF GOD'S PRESENCE

This is also directly relevant to our understanding of Advent as a time when Christ bids us to 'keep awake' and 'stay alert' as he says in the Gospel. Awakeness and alertness are far more than merely being physically upright, for so much of what we do is done subconsciously and without real thought. Sometimes I manage to make a cup of tea in the morning with my eyes still virtually closed! God only knows how I don't burn myself every day! But the attitude of Advent is a real awareness of what is going on so that we might discern God's deeper purposes and meaning. Our Lord gives the example of the tender branches of the fig tree which are a sign of approaching summer, if only we are alert to see it. Likewise, Advent is a time when God invites us to an attentiveness to the ways He is already present in our lives, to the dawning presence of salvation in the future both near at hand at Christmas and in the future at the end of our lives and in his Second Coming.

ADVENT ALERTNESS

So if you are looking for a way to keep alert this Advent that goes beyond the chocolate Advent calendar, then you could do far worse than to consider your morning routine, your own liturgy of awakening, and decide to change one thing as a sign of your openness to God's presence in your life. It might be putting away the temptation to scroll through Twitter and using the same time to sit in expectant silence. It might be swapping the newspaper for the Advent

book as you eat your breakfast. It might be taking up the author's very own suggestion of making your bed and while doing so commending to God the people who are dearest to you and offering your day in his service. Such small changes, can have profound effects and it is in such things that we are formed and changed as Christians and as human beings.

I shall let the author have the final word:

'The kind of spiritual life and disciplines needed to sustain the Christian life are quiet, repetitive and ordinary. I often want to skip the boring, daily stuff to get to the thrill of an edgy faith. But it's in the dailiness of the Christian faith – the making the bed, the doing the dishes, the praying for our enemies, the reading the Bible, the quiet, the small, that God's transformation takes root and grows'.