

Faith and a Senior Citizen Anselm SSF



The novelist L.P. Hartley left us a memorable and oft quoted sentence at the beginning of *The Go Between* - 'The past is a foreign country - they do things differently there'. I can identify two such foreign countries in the past, to put alongside the one in which I live at present. I call them Learning and Doing. Where do I live now? I live in Slowing.

The frontiers between them are not closed and impenetrable. Immigration controls are lax, and outposts of Slowing are to be found certainly in Doing, even in Learning, e.g. retreats. A colony of Learning is to be found in Slowing (the University of the Third Age?) - and so on. Roughly, I lived in Learning until overtaken by the work at St Francis School, community office, parish ministry, the Birmingham housing estate - all counties in Doing. Now, I inhabit Slowing. Here, in Slowing, faith has less of a sharp focus, is less at variance with other preoccupations, is more of a flavour or a temperature. Prayer is at once more difficult and easier to distinguish from anything else, and it provides us with a starting point.

In Learning, I am a child. 'Have you said your prayers?' 'O yes - God bless Daddy and Mummy and all the uncles and aunties'. I am at Sunday School sitting on the vicarage carpet singing CSSM choruses and Golden Bells. I am a server getting it right, enjoying dressing up and clouds of incense. I am confirmed and a first communicant. I am a National Serviceman not quite managing to kneel down by my bed in the barrack room, but punctilious in camp chapel attendance (noticing the Union Jack altar frontal, never before observed among the liturgical colours). I am the devout young man eager to explore and experiment via *The Art of Mental Prayer* (Bede Frost) and *Introduction to the Devout Life* (Francis de Sales). I am the zealous novice ploughing through Pere Pourrat's three volumes. Prayer time is spent on a stone or cement floor, before getting back to the serious work of eating, or chopping wood.

In Doing, performing the task takes over. From being part of the well ordered routine of the noviciate, prayer has to be squeezed in. If it should be squeezed out until bed time, prayer yields to sleep which is necessary for

survival - survival demanded by the task. This is not to say that prayer gets lost. It calls for self discipline, rather than conformity with routine - the proven value of prayer ensures that an effort is made. When the effort fails prayer is missed - and, missed.

For this inhabitant of Slowing prayer seems less self-conscious, and more natural. It has shed most of the techniques, styles and schools. It is less complicated, and often more difficult. It doesn't feel like exercises any more. I listen to the Jesus of the gospels and can hear only that I am not to parade prayer, and that I am to pray the 'Our Father'. So, what was all the fuss about?

The life of prayer, the life of faith, needs nourishment. The Eucharist, whether I dwell in Learning, Doing, or Slowing, is always a powerful factor, reinforced by music whether of sound or language. Indeed language, written language, books - exercise a fascination rivalled only by that of living people.

In Learning the very appearances of books fat or thin, illustrated or not, are memorised in a way that nothing else is, so as to persist as luggage to be declared at the frontiers of Doing and Slowing. A row of dusty Dickens on the shelf, Observer's Birds read in the train going to school in Littlehampton - text books, geography in green, history in plum colour, brown Latin primer; between the covers, so much more to be found than facts. In Learning, foundations are being laid. I can add to the experience of my own everyday existence, the experience mediated by the written word. I can put alongside the encounters with parents, siblings, friends, which are my unwritten but deeply felt story - other stories: David Copperfield, The Electronic Theory of Valency, anything on wild life.

In Learning the Bible is read uncritically with the help of notes - but the engineering student joins the Student Christian Movement, and the ground of faith shifts. Later, the young friar reads Honest to God, faith is founded less on the brittle basis of unquestioning acceptance of what is given, more on a critical appreciation of the faith tradition with the help of Christian scholarship. This item accompanies me through Learning and Doing into Slowing and is more of a living creature in a travelling cage than an inert suitcase.

So, two powerful players in the faith story - prayer and print. Stronger than either are people. Learning, Doing and Slowing are inhabited by fellow citizens for whom my Learning is their Doing, my Doing their Learning, and so on.

Dad grew up on Suffolk farms, experienced France from 1914-18, the Home Guard from 1940-44, and Freemasonry from then until his death in 1964. Mother was a Guernsey girl, a nurse, a midwife, a wife, a mother of three. Her loyalties were to church, Mothers' Union, and the Universities' Mission to Central Africa. She nearly joined - a Swahili grammar was on the shelf and aroused the curiosity of her children - but matrimony intervened. In Learning, we are the sort of family which all march off to church on Sunday morning except Dad who stays firmly in his workshop. Mother gives us faith, Dad

gives us his quiet goodness and affection - the beginning of Learning. Next, I meet teachers at the evacuated boarding school, teachers of science at secondary school and university and Geoffrey the chaplain - and everywhere, friends. Friends at school, at university, in National Service, in SSF all play their part in Learning.

In others, we see the image, the reflection, of God. In Learning, my response to others is instinctive and immature. I respond, or react, with love, hate, fear, trust, respect, scorn as intuitive reactions and certainly without 'theological reflection' - but this is learning, and in that far off country, and in strong relationships, others begin to assume a significance which gives them a reality beyond that of being, as it were, a part of me, or just a tool.

In Doing, I find myself at work in a boarding school and meeting colleagues and boys and their parents and families - later the brothers in the Province, then parishioners, then young people on a Birmingham housing estate. All of these present a task, and an opportunity - the task, whether therapy, education, leadership, or pastoral care can often rob me of the opportunity of meeting God in others. It brings with it professional constraints and demands, as well as sheer pressure of events.

In Slowing the constraints, the demands, the pressures fall away, leaving a space in which the opportunity for recognising God in others can be more readily seized upon, in memory as well as in the present. And in this space, for this Senior Citizen, is to be found strong grounds for faith in God. **f**