

Reflection for January 2021

Theme: **Starting Anew**

Read: Is: 35

There is a bird that lays no eggs and has no young. It was here when the world began and is still living today, in a hidden, faraway desert spot. It is the bird of fire. It looks at the sun and sings "Sun, glorious sun, I shall sing my songs for you alone. Forever and ever!"

One day, when it had lived for 500 years, it began to feel that it's end was near. It was often tired, and it had lost much of its strength. It couldn't soar so high in the sky, nor fly as fast or as far as when it was young.

"I don't want to live like this," the bird thought. "I want to be young and strong." So it lifted its head and sang, "Sun, glorious sun, make me young and strong again!" but the sun didn't answer...

So it flew across the desert, over the hills, green valleys, and high mountains. The journey was long, and because the bird was old and weak, it had to rest along the way. Each time it landed, it collected pieces of cinnamon bark and all kinds of fragrant leaves. It tucked some in among its feathers and carried the rest in its claws. The bird began to build itself a nest at the top of the tree, with the cinnamon bark and lined it with fragrant leaves.

Now everything was ready. The bird sat down in its nest, lifted its head, and sang, "Sun, glorious sun, make me young and strong again!"

This time the sun heard the song. Swiftly it chased the clouds from the sky and stilled the winds and shone down on the mountainside with all its power. Suddenly there was a flash of light, flames leaped out of the nest, and the bird became a big round blaze of fire.

After a while the flames died down. The tree was not burnt, nor was the nest. But the bird was gone. In the nest was a heap of silvery-gray ash.

The ash began to tremble and slowly heave itself upward. From under the ash there rose up a young one. It was small and looked sort of crumpled, but it stretched its neck and lifted its wings and flapped them. Moment by moment it grew, until it was the same size as the old bird. The young Phoenix lifted its head and sang, "Sun, glorious sun, I shall sing my songs for you alone! Forever and ever!"

When the song ended, the wind began to blow, the clouds scudding across the sky, and the other living creatures crept out of their hiding places. The Phoenix lives still today. But every five hundred years, when it begins to feel weak and old it builds a fragrant nest on top of a palm tree, and there the sun once again burns it to ashes. But each time, the Phoenix rises up from those ashes, fresh and new and young again.

The mythical bird has stood as a symbol of rebirth, resurrection, and new life for ages. It reminds us of the truth that somehow the little grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die to go on living in a new way.

This past year has perhaps been a purging of sorts for the whole world. Willingly, unwillingly we have all had to shut down even if for a short period of time, and take a closer look at Life as we know it. Collectively, we went through the stages of grief and perhaps moved back and forth at our own paces. May be we didn't go through all of them, or perhaps not in the order, but perhaps we remember visiting some of these phases... As we usher in the Near Year, let's take a walk through the one that has been, the year which the whole world has wanted to see the end of; because sometimes for something new to be born, we must be willing to sit in the ashes of the old...

As we revisit this year, let's revisit it through the stages of grief. We have been through some of these, we may still be in one of these. Even as we respect our own pace, let us also listen to the Spirit who may be urging us forward...

“the desert” (v 1)

1. Denial: Despite the obvious onslaught of the virus, many governments were still in denial. “It's just a flu!” “Community transmission has not started” “Everything is in control.” And while leaders of nations, MNCs and institutions went through their own kind of refusal to see the truth, we as individuals certainly would have gone through our own. “There is no need to shut down the churches.” “Where is our faith?” Leaders of various church groups even claimed “It cannot touch us”.

Interestingly this was also the phase when people stuck at home started discovering new hobbies, wanted to learn new things, the young went out to play without a care in the world and the world joked about being on a vacation.

Do you recollect having gone through denial? Did you imagine this would go on the whole year and spill into the next? What was going through your heart at this time?

“the wilderness” (v 1)

2. Anger: “Why aren't people keeping the rules?” “It is traffic as usual.” “Why couldn't the leaders control this second wave?” Personally I remember being angry at a religious gathering that was attended by lakhs of people, where the leaders themselves were affected. The people returned to different parts of the country and the virus spread. My anger was fuelled further by similar sentiments that were expressed by the media. I, like many others, thought my anger was justified.

Incidentally, this was also the time when abuse in homes were at an all-time high.

Did you at any time feel a sense of anger, righteous or otherwise, in connection to the pandemic? Did you sense anger in the tones of the community members? At the government? The church? The media? At ourselves for not doing enough?

“the feeble hands” (v 3)

3. Bargaining: This is where we wanted to negotiate, make a bargain with Life, with God- “Lord if this pandemic gets over, I will pray more/ trust more/ be a better Religious” “I will visit these homes/ pray with the sick”.

This may have also been the time when we made the most number of calls to friends/ loved ones in an attempt to reach out because here, in the stage of making bargains, we long to share our story, we long to speak to someone and tell them what’s happening within.

Were there times when you tried to bargain away the burden you were carrying or you found your community carrying? Did you have someone you could talk to during this time? If yes, who were your trusted confidantes in this stage? If not, how did the absence of a confidante make you feel?

“the haunts where jackals once lay” (v 7)

4. Depression: This is when the pain has really sunk in. We are face to face with reality and the emptiness we feel is real. Perhaps at this stage you wanted to withdraw from daily activities, you felt numb, as if in a fog. The reality is so painful that you didn’t want to get out of bed, or eat, or do your daily chores or do the Liturgy of the Hours. The world/ your vocation seemed too much and too overwhelming for you to face.

Unlike the bargain stage where one wants to talk, here one is closed in, unwilling to talk and doesn’t want to be around others.

Perhaps while in communities, we may have learnt to mask our depression by doing the chores/ attending the prayers but inside we feel like a machine that wants to shut down.

Q: Did you find yourself in moments or long spells of depression, with or without the pandemic? What would you do at this stage?

“will be glad” “will blossom” (v 1)

5. Acceptance/ Hope: At this stage, we would have begun to accept or at least come to terms with the losses, the unsung funerals and the permanent changes the

pandemic has caused. The fog lifts and we want to reconnect with our friends again. This is not to say there won't be bad days, but the good will outnumber the bad. We slowly evolve into our new reality.

Perhaps that's why it's great to have an old year end with the Advent/ Christmas season because no matter what the year has been, and 2020 certainly was one such year, it still, like all other years, must end with hope because that's what the Christmas season is all about.

And perhaps that's why, we must, with gratitude look expectantly to the New Year, because even if the situation hasn't changed, we have. If nothing else, the grief has brought us closer to the Cross, and the cross always ends with a resurrection. Much like the phoenix rising from the ashes, we, too, will rise anew.

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and auld langsyne? (times long past)*

*For auld langsyne, my dear,
for auld langsyne,
we'll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld langsyne.*

Questions for reflection

1. Does the tale of the Bird of Fire speak to you? If yes, which aspect of it?
2. What is/are the fragrant things that we need to build our nests with, that will attract the blaze of the Son?
3. Does the Bird of Fire also symbolize our community/ Congregation? And what aspect of it do you think is most important for us as a community/congregation?