

Who Are We?

by Fr Philip Marshall

Some years ago, I had a very strange experience. I was celebrating Mass in a parish early one cold winter morning. The congregation shuffled in, limping, coughing, and supported on sticks and frames. It was a gathering of the elderly and infirmed who had come to open their hearts to God. I looked at the congregation and felt some sadness to see what life had done to them.

During the Mass, something inexplicable and extraordinary happened. I can't quite describe or explain it. At one point, these people seemed all aflame with light. It was as if they had caught fire and each of them seemed extraordinarily beautiful. It only lasted a moment, but the memory of it has lasted forever. I think I glimpsed, in some strange way, the eternal truth of them. That beneath the infirmity, the ravages of age and the burden of years, there still existed that flaming beautiful self that God has known from all eternity and will love for all eternity.

It helped me see that this is true for all of us. There was a moment in our existence before we were hurt, before we were disappointed or damaged, when we existed unwounded and beautiful before God. And that self, the one that God knows, still exists within us. As the years pass, we cover our innocent, 'unwounded' self over with behaviours, protections, and disguises. But God still sees us.

I think this is deeply true, perhaps the deepest truth about us. I'd like to propose two things for your consideration.

Firstly, that we try to live and pray from that place within us. That, from time to time, we stop and remember who we truly are, underneath all the crust of our experience. And that we try to speak from that place, pray from that place, love toward each other from that place. This is something we can practise and it will grow with time.

Secondly, that we look deeply at each other and try to recognise that same place within everyone else we meet. To look below the crust that has developed over the years and relate to the beautiful one within whom God sees clearly and whom by grace we can also glimpse. It will transform all of our relationships. Read the gospels carefully and you can see how completely this shaped every encounter Jesus had with others.

Who are we? We are sparks created by the Living God, destined to shine now and for all eternity.

