

The Rare Jewel of Contentment – 3 February 2021

I'm on holiday – at least I will be when I've done this recording. This is the time of year when Gill and I love to be in the Alps, enjoying skiing, a hobby we both love. But of course this year it is not possible. So we are going to enjoy a week at home in Blackburn, a town which we love dearly, but I admit has not really been discovered as a major tourist destination.

In lockdown it is very tempting to focus on what we have had to do without, and to indulge in a bit of self-pity.

However in preparation for our holiday at home I have been reading an amazing book first published in 1648, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. Jeremiah Burroughs writes, 'Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.'

In other words, contentment comes from trusting that God is watching over us where we are and accepting that whatever stuff happens somehow God can use it for our good and for our spiritual growth. I have learnt over the years that the 'Why?' question sows discontent, whereas the 'What?' question unlocks the potential for growth. Instead of asking 'Why has this happened to me?' it is so much more helpful to ask, 'What do you want to teach me through this?'

Contentment grows when we learn to thank God for what we have, rather than focusing on what we lack. Contentment also grows when we accept our circumstances rather than bemoaning them. Much discontent comes from wishing either we could be somewhere else or that people around us were somewhere else. 'Life would be so much better if I moved to that house, or had that job, or if only that colleague would leave or go away.' St Benedict has quite a bit to say about this in his monastic Rule. He warns monks against grumbling, and teaches that contentment is to be found in the virtue of *stabilitas*.

We translate that word as stability, but the point Benedict is making is that a monk is called to stay in one place, not to have itchy feet. Contentment comes when we learn to accept that God has placed us where we are for a reason, and that the people around us aren't going anywhere either, so we might as well learn to accept our surroundings and really work at getting on with those around us rather than wishing them somewhere else.

Paul's letter to the Philippians was written in lockdown, not in the comfort of his own home, but in a cold, damp prison cell, and yet the letter is fully of joy, because he has discovered that he is not alone, that Christ is with him in lockdown, and that his strength is enough for any situation. He wrote, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.'

I am looking forward to my week off in lockdown Blackburn, and my prayer is that this simple break will help me discover again the rare jewel of Christian contentment.

Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn