

As the (School) Holiday Season moves towards its end, a Reflection on the True Purpose of Holidays/Holy Days....



HOLIDAYS

When spring turns to summer our thoughts turn to holidays. Many of us are unaware that the word holiday comes from the Old English word for Holy Day. The word originally referred only to special religious days, such as Christmas, Easter, saints' days etc.

What is the connection between holidays and holy days? Both express the need for rest, recreation, finding refreshment, renewal. We take time out of our very active lives of doing just to be, to enjoy and to celebrate. In the Gospel, after the disciples' busy journeys of teaching and sharing the Good News, Jesus said: "You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest awhile." They needed a holiday, just as we do to balance our very frenetic lives.

Holidays can be enjoyed at home or abroad, in the sunshine by the sea, or may take the form of a walking tour, such as a pilgrimage. A holiday is our response to a need for change from the daily routine, time for special moments of sharing, fun and relaxation with family and friends - a time to renew ourselves in body, mind and spirit.

In his poem 'Leisure', the Welsh poet WH Davies wrote:

*'What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?
No time to stand beneath the boughs,
And stare as long as sheep and cows:
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night...'*

How simple this seems and yet how challenging to many of us today. Too often

we are not present to the richness, graces and blessings of the present moment. Because of the stresses and strains of work or family life, because we are glued to our phones, we are seldom aware of what is going on around us, seldom inside ourselves enough to savour the flavour of the everyday moments of beauty, be it in nature or in the face of another person.

One who did respond was the poet Patrick Kavanagh in his poem 'Canal Bank Walk':

*'O unworn world enrapture me,
enrapture me in a web
Of fabulous grass and eternal
voices by a beech,
Feed the gaping need of my senses,
give me ad lib
To pray unselfconsciously
with overflowing speech
For this world needs to be honoured
with a new dress woven
From green and blue things and arguments
that cannot be proven.'*

Here, Kavanagh experienced the extraordinary in the ordinary. In that simple, yet profound moment he was renewed. For both poets the trick is how to live in the present, to be aware of what is just below the surface of our lives, to come home to ourselves. For myself the test of any holiday (short or long), any pilgrimage or retreat, is to come to this point of being renewed, refreshed, at peace with myself and with the world as I return to the regular round of my daily life. ●

Sr Patricia Byrne