

It is a fact of the psychology of human existence, that there are as many worlds as there are people. This is because the world for every single one of us consists of two things: i) what we experience; and ii) our response and reaction to that experience. These two things together make up the world we know and live in. Each of us therefore lives in our own inner world.

In the gospel of John, we need to know how the word 'world' is being used – otherwise we might think that Jesus had a very negative view of it. He didn't, of course: he used many images and examples from nature to illustrate his teaching – flowers, birds, seeds, crops, the weather; a lot of his parables were about celebrations, banquets, weddings, births... and he clearly enjoyed his food and drink – much to the annoyance of the Pharisees. Jesus Christ as a man clearly appreciated his human nature – just as we do, most of the time. It's a little more difficult to be thankful for our humanity when we have arthritis or toothache or earache or hemorrhoids. However: every day it is up to us to give thanks to the living God for our life and our being. Not particularly to give thanks for this or that, but to be grateful simply for the

fact that we exist. To live as best we can in a spirit of thankfulness is the surest path to inner peace.

Besides, Jesus came from within a tradition that celebrated material creation – and the human body – as part of its religious practice. On the eve of the Sabbath for example, married couples were encouraged to make love.

And yet the readings we have been having from John's gospel for many weeks now, and all the teachings of Jesus about the world in that gospel, appear to be rather bleak. For example:

- “The world will make you suffer, but have courage, for I have overcome the world.”
- “The world cannot give you peace.”
- “If the world hates you, it has hated me first.”
- “You do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.”
- “The world has never known the Father.”

But when Jesus speaks of the world and prays that his disciples will be protected from it, he is not referring to the natural world. He was *not* talking about the sun, moon, stars, mountains, forests, the seas, and lakes; he did *not* mean music, good food, wine, friendship, companionship or love –

because all these things are good and necessary and are there for our delight.

He means the inner world of human greed, of the hunger for power, of lust, lies, dishonesty and disregard for others. This inner world has projected itself outwardly, and has created the kingdoms and empires that Jesus said belonged to the devil: the kingdoms of political, economic and social injustice, oppression and ambition; of multinational corporations which ravage and destroy poorer nations for richer profits; the empires of our day where money is control, control is power, and when some people's wealth is too great to be reckoned while others lack the bare necessities of life, an obscene world of unimaginable inequality and indifference. *This* is the world that has never known the Father; that will make us suffer; that hates us because we are not of it; the world that is incapable of giving us peace – the world that Jesus prayed to the Father to protect his disciples from.

So, what do we have to do? In all this grandiose theoretical argumentation, what is our modest, practical, everyday responsibility? If it doesn't come down to the practical and the everyday, it means nothing. **We don't run vast**

multinational corporations, we're not wealthy enough to direct the beginnings and endings of international conflicts, and we don't have immense power because we don't have immense control or immense financial resources.

Well:

In some way, however small, it is our spiritual task and mission to do something contrary to the kingdoms and empires of this world. St Thérèse of Lisieux, one of the greatest saints ever, lived the whole of her very short life in the belief that smaller is greater. She recommended picking up a pin solely for the love of God. To counter the kingdoms and empires of greed, we could make one single, individual act of loving-kindness – whatever charities we may officially support – to someone in need; and immediately afterwards tell ourselves it never happened. To counter the kingdoms and empires of power and control, we could let something go: some small thing that we think we don't want to be without, some tiny possession we believe we absolutely need – for me it would undoubtedly be a book – or perhaps an entrenched attitude, a deeply engrained opinion of someone we don't really like – we could just let go of it, not give it a

second thought, drop it forever. To counter the kingdoms and empires of lust, we could be deliberately tender with someone we love: a romantic gesture, an affectionate touch, a moment of just silently being together, a stolen kiss. And to do all this as a conscious, deliberate spiritual practice.

Because the outer is always a reflection of the inner, it may be that perhaps when an inner vaccine against society's spiritual illnesses has been found, perhaps outer vaccines to heal all kinds of physical sicknesses will also be found. This, I would say, is a hope of the symbolic life.