

Twenty or so years ago, I had the great privilege of being at a mass in St Peter's Rome celebrated by Pope St John Paul II. Also present on that occasion was the Protestant Brother Roger Schutz, the founder and then prior of the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé. Both now well on in years and ailing in different ways, Pope John Paul and Brother Roger had a well known friendship and it was touching to see the Pope personally give communion to his Protestant friend.

This year, the Common Worship feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known by most Christians as her Assumption, the Dormition or the Falling Asleep, is also the eve of the fifteenth anniversary of Roger's horrific, and equally public, murder in his own monastic church, within six months of the death of John Paul himself.

I want to suggest three themes that were characteristic both of Mary and Brother Roger and also offer us a sure pathway for our own discipleship: **joy, simplicity and mercy.**

I was led to these by an interview on TV many years ago with Br Alois, Brother Roger's successor as prior of Taizé, who described how they were at the heart of Brother Roger's approach to life and guidance of his community. He had written them into the Rule of Taizé, and saw them as a kind of summary of the Beatitudes:

[3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[4] "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

[5] "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

[6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

[7] "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

[8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

[9] "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

[10] "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[11] "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

[12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It's hard to translate the word we have as "blessed", which may sound rather is probably rather pious or overly religious. Some modern versions have "happy", which doesn't sound quite right either, because it might suggest a kind of jolly cheerfulness. The original meaning of the word often signifies the perfect bliss of God's own self, so it certainly conveys a sense of a deep joy and contentment that surpasses anything this world can know and turns on its head everything that passes for worldly success.

Jesus says that in order to be truly happy we don't need to be successful in the way the world thinks. I don't need to spell this out, but it is worth just remembering that most worldly success involves in being more or better than other people. There's nothing wrong with being competitive in itself; it's one of the drivers of human excellence. But when it becomes the be-all-and-end-all of our lives, it's bound to end in disappointment. After all, we shall all die and experience the end of all our striving. So what's left then?

The Beatitudes, summed up by Brother Roger as "joy, simplicity and mercy", offer a completely different set of values for living, values that mark the kingdom of God, values that last for ever. These values were exemplified above all by Jesus, who taught his disciples, as he put it, "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (Jn 15:11).

The same values have been proved by everyone who has tried to imitate Jesus, and who more than Mary? When someone cried out, "Happy the womb that bore you", Jesus answered, "Happy those who hear the word of God and keep it." Mary, again, who "kept God's word in her heart", who sang of how her spirit rejoiced in God her Saviour. Remember too how her cousin Elizabeth greeted her, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord promised would be fulfilled."

In his first Encyclical, Pope Francis wrote that "The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew."

Closely related to joy is the second theme, simplicity. There is a rather cynical saying "Little things please little minds." I think we should reclaim that saying from the cynics. If taking pleasure in little things is a sign of a little mind, I want to plead guilty.

In the Bible, especially in the NT, simplicity is to do with single-mindedness, having a clear focus for one's life and thoughts and actions. It describes the way in which the early Christians lived. It's rather reminiscent of the fable of the hedgehog and the fox. The fox is a very cunning animal and spent a lot of time devising different strategies for killing and eating the hedgehog. But everything he tried was met by the same response - often right at the last minute - the hedgehog rolled itself up into a tight prickly ball and thwarted the fox's clever plans. The struggle has been summed up in an ancient phrase, "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Simplicity for us too is knowing one big thing, the love of God, and relating everything else to that. Knowing that one big thing is what enabled Mary to remain close to Jesus throughout his life, through periods of happiness and sadness, to be with him when almost all his friends had deserted him on the cross, to be a witness to his resurrection, to share the gift of the Spirit and be the faithful companion of St John.

And third, mercy. Our word “mercy” conveys a number of different biblical ideas, but above all that of undeserved lovingkindness, but also forgiveness, help for those in need and, rather wonderfully, that kind of churning feeling you get in your guts when you are really moved by something or someone. It’s one of the main characteristics of the God revealed in the Bible - so, Jesus told his disciples to “be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful” and of course he showed that mercy himself, as too did Mary.

Like most great spiritual teachers, Brother Roger had a knack of cutting through nonsense and getting straight to the heart of the matter. He suggested joy, simplicity and mercy as a kind of highway to lead us to heaven. Today, as we thank God for the Assumption of Mary, we recognise her footprints on the road. That’s probably why this Protestant pastor became such a favourite of Pope John Paul II and, for that matter, of another great saint of our own days, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

It would be no bad thing to spend some time reflecting on the place of joy, simplicity and mercy in your own life. Ask God to fill your heart with his joy, your mind with his simplicity and your will with his mercy.