



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - June 2009

The Flower of Grass

MANY YEARS ago I read a little book by the Belgian poet and professor of Belgian studies, Emile Leon Cammaerts (1878-1953). The Flower of Grass made a great impression on me because it taught me, early on, how important the Middle Ages were. Belgium is a modern country, a country torn apart by successive world wars, and nowadays the centre of the European Union. The Low Countries (nowadays Belgium and Holland) were unrivalled centres of civilization in the Middle Ages: extraordinary churches, wonderful art, the centre of a whole style of musical composition. And much enriched by guilds: craftsmen, merchants, shopkeepers, religious associations.

Cammaerts' argument, as I remember it, was that we have lost the way of belonging together in community that they knew so much about in the Middle Ages. Instead of coming together in fellowships and guilds, we live our lives separately from one another. Cammaerts was writing over 60 years ago, at the end of the war. What he says is even truer now, of course. He was speaking not only about community but also about economics and trade. As we live through a crisis of capitalism – where incomes, mortgages, and savings have gone haywire – it would be good to look back to how things used to be. Not when we were young. But in a much earlier age. Before the rise of individualism. When God and not human beings were at the centre of human life.

I am not just talking about money. I am more than happy to leave economics to the economists: money is not something I know about. The last thing we need is priests peddling pet political theories. As the threat of a flu pandemic became news in May, people talked about 'social distancing' – to minimise the spread of the virus. But 'social distancing' (keeping ourselves to ourselves), has, in a different sense, produced loneliness and misery. We need to rediscover a sense of the corporate – our life together, and our dependence on one another. At its best, this is what the Church still has to teach a society which, at its worst, has even begun to lose a sense of family life. Perhaps our churches and our liturgies, our meetings and our fellowship, can help others rediscover what it is to be connected in community, the importance of Christian marriage, the need for children to be nurtured amidst a happy and secure home life. Such is the calling of the Christian community.

May One God, who is Three Persons in a community of love, richly bless you.

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