

Thinking Of People

All in all, we spend much of our thinking time - and our dreaming time - on people. We wouldn't have it any other way. People are the beauty of the earth, the ministers of grace to us; our relationship with others is what makes our life full or empty, happy or miserable, rich or poor. So I think it's pretty important what we think about people in general, our attitude towards them. We ought to take a look at how we meet people for the first time, how we react to the possibility of a new person crossing our path.

An Awesome Business

When you consider the extremes of what another human being can do in your life, it's an awesome moment. Good children almost always get round to asking their parents where and when they met, what they thought of each other, how long it took them to realise that they wanted to know each other better, how they knew they were going to be close, how they knew they were going to be married. For me, these questions are vital ones. If they'd been answered differently I wouldn't be here to think of them. But then I think of all the other girls my father knew, and all the other lads within reach of my mum. What was it that led the pair of them to these choices, my story? You can never say "You were the only girl in the world!" What a lot of girls there are! Each of them, if we could see it, as much capable of the same tender love, the same generous gift as the ones we do know and love. But we simply don't see them like that; we pass them without attention, the sad girl behind the till, the dull bloke in the bank. How much of the day do we spend alive to the people around us? How far do we give life a chance to break in on us, to become a vital and beautiful series of encounters, of relationship?

"A Beautiful Space"

At a recent meeting where we had to assess the qualities of some candidates, a witness said of one of them: *In his conversation, he creates a beautiful space for the person he is meeting.* I thought this was true of this gentle Asian person, and for a moment I felt how much I'd love someone to have thought it of me. But I know it isn't true. Many of us are so busy, we're three streets ahead of the person we're meeting, trying to cut corners for the next meeting but two. So often we miss the

precious key that each meeting offers us, to open *this* door, to understand something of the mystery of *this* person. One of the good things about the confessional is that you don't get the urge to think ahead: you have to listen to what *this* person is saying, catch the tone of *this* voice, pick up every nuance you can of *this* person who has come. There at least a priest can try to create a beautiful space, a place of welcome and reconciliation, peace and hope. It can be a very sacred place.

Fra Angelico

Brother John of Fiesole was a Dominican friar who lived in the priory of Fiesole above Florence, one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen. His soul was so filled with beauty, not only in the mountains and the light, but the cities and the people he knew. He poured out his love for them in a great and irreplaceable life's work of painting, and his unfailing kindness to the people he painted earned him his nickname, *Angelic Brother*: sounds a bit soppy in English, but in the art world he is never called other than *Fra Angelico*. He saw health, strength, and beauty in the faces he knew, and he painted them at their best. His Dominican saints are grave and spiritual, but graceful and loving. His angels are decorous, but charming and slightly playful. His Mary is humble, luminous, and innocent: she presents to the world a baby who is an epiphany of healthy infancy. I suppose I'd say that he sees a world that is almost assumed into heaven already, a world where we might dream of venturing, not to meet disappointment and disgrace, but to meet a humanity that reflects the glory of its Maker. I think back to the golden experience of his paintings, gathered in the shining gallery of san Marco in Florence, and I compare the visual diet of my daily world. I remember that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and am ashamed. I pray for a world that sees the miracle of grace coming home in real faces and beloved forms, dear to God and dear to the people of God. I pray for a breaking down of the cynical and the hateful, which looks to find the worst in every meeting. I pray for the faith to be shared, that sees a lowly handmaiden lifted to the heights, the hungry fed, the captives set free, and all the squalid bitterness of our age cleansed and banished by the force of the incarnation of Christ.

Fr Philip