

Professor D.W. Parsons



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First Friday : The Sacred Heart in Jersey



On this first Friday in the month of October I am minded to reflect on some time I recently spent in Jersey, one of the Channel islands. It was in Jersey (1901-1905) that the young Teilhard managed to fit two parts of his life together- his vocation to the priesthood and his vocation to become a scientist. During the time he was there as a student he spent a good deal of his time investigating the geology of the island – which in due course resulted in a number of scientific papers. By the time he left Jersey Teilhard had grown into a young man with a deep commitment to both his priesthood and to his scientific mission. He regarded it as an island in which he experienced a 'honeymoon' with geology (cited in King, *Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Mysticism*, p 379) : so Jersey is where we might say that he truly fell in love with the subject. It is where he begins to really try and marry up, so to speak, the spiritual and scientific aspects of his life. So, it was good to explore places that Teilhard must have known well. He became excited by the idea of evolution not in Jersey, but later in Hastings. It is clear however, that his geological experiences in Jersey must have provided him with a great deal of material to draw upon and was a lasting influence. In Jersey he was a long way from his Omega point and the Sacred Heart as the complete expression of the love of God. As he put it in *The Heart of Matter*, ' a meeting of Centre with Centre, of Heart with Heart..were anticipated rather than realized' (p40) at this time. In truth, I did not go to Jersey looking either for Teilhard or the Sacred Heart – we just wanted a relaxing break in the last of the summer sun before the onset of autumn and winter - but they found me alright.

After settling in the hotel we walked down the road (Rouge Bouillon) and within a few minutes passed



a sign for an old one-time orphanage, Sacré Coeur. (Which was established when Teilhard was here, but in another location.) High on the top was a rather vivid statue of the Sacred Heart, complete with a large crow perched on its head. Only a few steps down the road and a Sacred Heart had spotted me! A short walk away, it turned out, was the place where Teilhard had studied and where he was encouraged to continue with his geological education, Maison St. Louis (see stamp above) - which is now a hotel, the Hotel de France. So, if I was not thinking about the Sacred Heart of Jesus, I realized that perhaps He was thinking about me! A short while later – now rather lost in St Helier- we came across the Catholic 'Cathedral' of the Island, dedicated to St Thomas, with a magnificent piece of stone carving over the door showing St. Thomas touching the wounded Heart of the Saviour. By then I got the feeling that this was going to be another journey into the mystery of the Heart of Jesus. The following day we found ourselves in St Aubin and, of course, there was a church of the Sacred Heart. And of course we popped in.



Karen Blampied's icon of the Sacred Heart

At the back of the church – rather too high up I thought - was a beautiful icon of the Sacred Heart. I have to admit I had to stand on a chair to have a closer look! It took me a while to figure out that the figures on the either side of Jesus are two local saints, St. Aubin and St. Brelade. The Church is in the village of St. Aubin in the Parish of St. Brelade. I liked the fact that the artist has chosen to connect the image – and what it represents – with the locality by using the

parochial saints but also (it seems to me) evoking the local environment. Jesus stands on the created order under which are what looks like waves of water and a piece of the local geology. The iconographer has also taken care to use of the key symbols associated with the pierced heart of the Saviour that are depicted on the altar of the church.



The icon therefore serves to bring together the local saints – who are depicted as receiving the radiating love of Christ’s heart- with the symbols in contained in the high altar under the image of the Sacred Heart. The two angels point to the centre of the icon and are asking us to centre – like the saints - our lives on the Heart that loves us so much. The iconographer, *Karen Blampied* has, I think, set out to place the Sacred Heart in the heart of the community and that is to be commended: she has not gone for the simple option of writing an icon of Christ with an exposed heart – as so many iconographers have tended to do. Instead she has chosen to use a more symbolic form of representation which (I think) evokes the early drawing of St. Margaret Mary. (For more about Karen, go [HERE](#), and her Sacred Heart [HERE](#)) This is an icon that is very much the Sacred Heart as a call for a community – a parish- to centre its life on the divine love and infinite mercy of the heart of the word of God. It is a call for parishioners to be less self-centered and more and more centred on the loving and merciful heart of Jesus. Just as the saints depicted in the icon placed Christ at the centre of their lives, so the icon is calling those who worship in the church in a village named after one saint and a parish after another, to centre their lives on the centre of Christ. We, in this time and in this place, have to open our hearts to the love of God. We, like the two saints in the icon have to follow the guidance of the angels and let our centre become Christ: he opens His heart to us and we are invited to open ours to His. In a sense Karen Blampied’s icon is complementary to Ian Knowles’s icon. In Ian’s icon we see a depiction of Christ as a cosmic, universal centre: we see Him drawing all things to himself. But, of course, we must remember that the local is the universal. We experience this great cosmic love described by Teilhard in a specific time and place. We live in a cosmos, but experience our daily lives in the small, local world captured by this icon by Karen. Ian gives us the Sacred Heart as the centre of the cosmos, and Karen the Sacred Heart as the centre of the community.

A high point in our visit to Jersey was unquestionably La Hougue Bie (go [HERE](#)) : and it was there where, in my mind, the two icons came together, helped by a third.

The site is, of course, world famous as a Neolithic site of great importance. However, I came to the conclusion that it is also a place which captures the essence of what the Sacred Heart is all about and why it is more and more relevant for our troubled times.



As you walk around the site you have to remember that human beings have been here in their various stages of cultural evolution for over 6,000 years. The 'grave' was constructed some 4000 years ago and covered with a great mound of earth. It is a remarkable piece of civil engineering and organization which must have taken a massive effort of labour and vast material resources to construct. As you contemplate this great human achievement you have to ask why? The answer, of course, is that to our ancestors such constructs were a significant and vital aspect of their religious and material existence. According to academic research, such buildings were constructed to serve as portals into another world- a world of the spirit.



Their lives in this material world required that they acknowledge their dependence on this other world of the non-material. This apparently required some kind of journey deep into a space far removed from the world on which the sun and moon shone. A space was needed in which the sun could, at certain times of the year illuminate the inner core of this mysterious space. At day time – when I crawled into the passage – it was possible to have light shining behind you: and on the way back there was light at the end of the tunnel. However, at night, it must have been very disconcerting, to say the least. It is not a long tunnel. I sensed that the real journey was the journey inside your own mind and (yes) heart. Our ancestors made a space out of stone and earth which was designed to enable them to experience a world beyond matter. In a way they were (in Teilhard's sense) spiritualizing matter. They would travel deep into the heart of this material world in order to encounter the spiritual world. Well, with thoughts such as these I was glad to get out, stretch and feel fresh air and sun on my skin.



When Christianity arrived on the island the mound represented the pagan world and to show the superiority of the new religion over the old primitive ways they built a church on the top. We climbed the mound to discover a small chapel in which some taped 'religious' music was being played. It was dedicated to 'Notre Dame de la Clarte' (Our Lady of Light): which given the function of the Neolithic structure underneath was appropriate enough. To our surprise on the altar was another icon which, we later discovered was also by Karen Blampied. Her icon beautifully illuminated and sanctified the little chapel. (See [HERE](#)) It made me think of Teilhard's writings on the Virgin Mary and the role of the feminine.



Karen Blampied's icon of Our Lady of Light

Such thoughts were quickly dispelled as we looked down and remembered that down there, deep in the earth, was another place of darkness, which marked out yet another stage in the human story: the German bunkers, constructed during the occupation of Jersey in the second world war, are now a memorial to the thousands of people forced to work for the German war machine.

Thinking about that as we walked down the mound, the Medieval legend surrounding the mound came to mind. It was a story of how a knight came to the area and promised to rid the people of

a dragon: in due course he killed the dragon, but his squire killed him and dressed up in his armour to take the credit for his master's bravery. The deed was discovered, the squire punished, and the body of the knight was buried under a great mound under the orders of the Lady of Hambye. The story thus captured the essence of the matter : the great conflict between the light of Christianity and the darkness of paganism. And there, all around us, we saw the remnants of the ongoing battle between light and darkness.

The German army had cut into the mound to create a bunker. Entering this darkness was, however, far more disconcerting than that I experienced in the ancient grave. The Neolithic darkness had a sacred and spiritual purpose. The tunnels dug by the German army using starving slave labour were built not for some quest for spiritual enlightenment, but for conquest, power and the exercise of evil. The Gospel of love proclaimed by Jesus was, in these earthworks confronted by a profound and utter darkness. A darkness darker than any Neolithic cave.



WW 2 Communications bunker - now memorial to forced workers



Lighthouse built to save life, German observation tower, built to destroy life.

As you take in the full horror of how the people who built all the miles and tons of constructions all over the island were treated, all one could do was reflect on the evolution of our species. How could a civilized country have produced an army capable of such calculated and hard-hearted behaviour towards their fellow human beings? How did they compare to the people who built the

mound 4,000 years ago? How did they emerge from a Christian world that had been so confidently marked out by the chapel on the top of the mound. Yet, here we were 1,900 years after Christ, plunged back into a darkness much darker and deeper than anything our Neolithic ancestors could have conceived?

As Teilhard understood, evolution is not a simple story of human progress. Evolution does not move in neat straight lines: it is a struggle. Human evolution is in our hands: we have to choose good over evil, and love over hate. Evolution is the cross we must carry. The story of human evolution is the story of how humanity harnesses the energies of the material world to create a civilization of love, or a civilization of hate. Humanity has to struggle constantly to realize a civilization of love and light against all the forces sin, hate and darkness. The struggle in Jersey, as elsewhere today, is different to that in the Second World War, but it is still the same old struggle to find the light and love of God in a world in which there are so many evil dragons and so much darkness caused by the sinfulness of humanity. It is still a struggle to allow the human heart to become a place where the love of God flames, and which is not overwhelmed by the darkness and the capacity of human beings to choose sin.

The Sacred Heart is a wonderful expression of the love of God for us, and the desire of a God (*who is love*) to penetrate into the deepest part of ourselves: our very heart. And yet, we close our hearts, and harden them. And when we do this we are on a very dangerous journey into a form of darkness that is far more impenetrable than that we might experience in the centre of La Hougue Bie. When we harden our hearts and close ourselves off from the light and fire of His love we can end up doing the most terrible and most evil of things. Ultimately we can do the kind of immoral acts like some of German soldiers did in Jersey- as recorded deep underground in the memorial exhibition. As an image the Sacred Heart is a powerful reminder that *God is love*, and He desires us to love Him and our fellow creatures as ourselves. In Teilhard (and Dante's) sense this is the love that drives the universe and pulls us towards His very core - if only we would let go of our egos and give up our sinful ways. If only we can become less self-centred and more centred on love and the challenge of harnessing this great energy to advance human progress. And the icon of Mary – *Our Lady of Light* – reminds us that she - the 'eternal feminine' - shows us the way, and tells us (as at the Marriage feast at Cana) simply and gently to *do what her son has told us to do*. When human beings fail to live with a heart open to the love and light that radiate from God, we are easy prey to the powers of hate and darkness. That is what I saw from the top of La Hougue Bie: a Sacred Heart deeply wounded by human sin, greed and hate, but still flaming with love and mercy. The image of the Sacred Heart is an image of hope and faith in the future. We are loved by a merciful creator.

It is, therefore appropriate that today is also the feast day of St. Francis. The Franciscans have made a great contribution to the spirituality of the heart and to the development of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. At mass today I was called to read from Baruch, 1: 15-22. It reminds us about the dangers of what can happen when we are not open to the voice of God and choose instead to follow the 'dictates of our evil hearts' and worshipping other gods. The Gospel acclamation (drawn from Psalm 144) calls us not to 'harden our hearts'. Pope Francis has made this very much a theme of his Papacy thus far and I believe that (as other Jesuits like Teilhard argued) the Sacred Heart is a doorway into the most profound truths of our faith. As we have noted elsewhere, Blessed John Paul makes this point in his reflections on the Litany of the Sacred Heart.(read[HERE](#)) What we encounter in those bunkers all over Jersey is precisely what human beings can do when they harden their hearts, and what amazing things people can do when they open their hearts and give up their liberty and ultimately their lives to help another human being. Once gain, I think Teilhard expressed it perfectly. What we see in Jersey is an example of how a clever and talented people were capable of harnessing their cleverness for hate and destruction. The Sacred Heart is urging us to do precisely the opposite. As he famously put it:

'Quelque jour, après l'espace, les vents, les marées, la gravitation, nous capterons, pour Dieu, les énergies de l'amour.- Et alors, une deuxième fois dans l'histoire du Monde, l'Homme aura trouvé le Feu.' Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, L'Évolution de la Chasteté, (Les

Directions de L'Avenir, Éditions du Seul, Paris1973, p92)

'The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.'

Our ancestors believed that there was a secret deep within creation, and La Hougue Bie was a kind of portal into this great mystery. Teilhard too, as a lover of rocks and earth, believed that there was a profound mystery in creation. His faith - and our faith - tells us exactly what it is.

'The great secret, the great mystery, is this: there is a heart of the world..and this heart is the heart of Christ.'