

26th August 2021

Without

“How many things I can do without.”

Socrates, as quoted by Diogenes Laertius in ‘Lives of the Philosophers’

A few weeks ago, I offered series of reflections on comfort, compassion and companion, all words which have “com” at the start, arising as they do from the Latin word *cum* meaning “with”. And it got me thinking about how often we say that there are things that we can’t do without. Are there? And, if so, what would they be for you?

I’m regularly intrigued by the choices people make on the long-running BBC Radio 4 programme, *Desert Island Discs*, not only in respect of the “eight gramophone records” they would want to take with them if they were marooned, but the other two choices: 1) What book would they choose to take to a desert island in addition to the Complete Works of Shakespeare and the Bible? and 2) What item could they not do without? They call this a “luxury”, but most people see it as a necessity – a writing implement; a penknife; an ice-making-machine; sunscreen; lipstick; an endless supply of crosswords; a family photograph. So, what would *you* take to a desert island that you couldn’t do without?

Once you’ve considered that – and gone through the tribulation of whittling down all the things you feel are absolutely necessary in your life to the one thing you can’t do without – why not take the exercise a bit further. Ask yourself if your life is built round *too many* necessities.

The philosopher and economist, John Stuart Mill, wrote in 1869:

The true virtue of human beings is fitness to live together as equals; claiming nothing for themselves but what they as freely concede to everyone else; regarding command of any kind as an exceptional necessity, and in all cases a temporary one.

Why can’t we live more simply than we do? Could we ever be in such a contented state that we command *nothing* as an absolute necessity? I’m not sure I can, but it’s a thought-process that’s worth working on. And you? Is there “true virtue” in considering with Socrates of old “how many things [we] can do without”?

A prayer for today

Living God, if I make a list of what I can’t do without, I wonder where my relationship with your Love would figure. A necessity? I hope so. Amen