

Along the track

When Tough Times Come

There are times when we are called on to 'do it tough'. None of us is immune from suffering, disappointments, sickness, anxiety or depression. None of these are pleasant, we do not seek out or wish them on others, even though sometimes other people cause us pain. Everybody knows what it is to suffer. We are not alone.

The poet Czeslaw Milosz puts it this way:

Hear me, Lord, for I am a sinner which means I have nothing except prayer.
Protect me from the day of dryness and impotence.
When neither a swallow's flight nor peonies,
daffodils and irises in the flower market are a sign of your glory.
When I will be surrounded by scoffers and unable,
against their arguments, to remember any miracle of yours.
When I will seem to myself an imposter and swindler
because I take part in religious rites...

Second Space, New Poems

We can all feel like this at times – tough times can bring this dryness, sometimes a feeling of helplessness, sadness and unhappiness, even a feeling that we are unworthy, unloved, that we are surrounded by scoffers or knockers. We can feel fear and shame, blaming ourselves for 'falling short,' not measuring up. Our faith may even leave us wondering.

So often when tough times come, when suffering or hardship strike, we separate ourselves from others. We feel alone. We think that no-one understands us or what we are going through. We have the feeling that we have done something wrong, that we are deficient in some way. We turn in on ourselves.

Milosz's poem paints a picture of someone alone, cut off, feeling like an imposter, a fake. But our well-being, our happiness depends on a sense of belonging. When God says that it is not good for us to be alone, God meant it. We need others, and they still need us. We are not alone. Tough times call on us to find ways to stay connected, to reach out to others, to accept help..... and to give it.

We are not God's pawns in the game of life. God has not designed this ordeal for us. God has not created this illness just for me. God does not rejoice in our suffering. Jesus paints a very vivid picture of the final judgment and it is not about how we have endured the bad times that life sometimes throws at us but rather how we have connected with others, how we have cared for the lonely, the hungry, those in prison and those in need of clothing and food. We are never alone – others have been down this path before us, Jesus has been down this path before us. And others always need us, no matter how we may feel.

There is an old story about a disciple going in search of wisdom.

"God is with you," the Holy One told him.

"Well, why can't I see this Presence?"

"Because you are like the fish who, when in the ocean, never notices the water," the Holy One explained.

So often we can be unaware of, de-sensitized to God's extraordinary closeness. It is not good for man to be alone, God says. It is not good for us to be without others, but it is not good for us to be without God! God is always with us. When tough times come we can suffer from a lack of vision and openness to see the wonders of God's love which are often right under our very noses – in the people we meet, the events of each day, in God's creation all around us.

God is not testing us. God does not want us to suffer, to feel unloved or unworthy. God is in this struggle with us - God is with us in the good times and the bad, in the times of joy and happiness and in the times of trial and struggle. When we come to understand that promise, then the despair can begin to dissolve, the anger and disappointment and bitterness can begin to fade. God is in this awful thing with us. God did not cause this feeling of sadness or despair and inadequacy. On the contrary, we are safe and loved and wanted. In St Paul's words:

'And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love.' Rom 8: 38

We can survive the tough times because we have made use of the good times by reaching out to others. In the words of Pope Francis:

How good it is for us to contemplate the closeness which Jesus shows to everyone! If he speaks to someone, he looks into their eyes with deep love and concern: "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him" (Mk 10:21). We see how accessible he is, as he draws near the blind man (Mk 10:46-52) and eats and drinks with sinners (Mk 2:16) without worrying about being thought a glutton and a drunkard himself (Mt 11:19). We see his sensitivity in allowing a sinful woman to anoint his feet (Lk 7:36-50) and in receiving Nicodemus by night (Jn 3:1-15). Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is nothing else than the culmination of the way he lived his entire life. Moved by his example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep; arm in arm with others.... But we do so not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives. Evangelii Gaudium 269

Regards
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