

Along the track

In My Weakness Is My Strength

Gift shops seem to be filled with 'inspiring words' posters of late – love, joy, peace, every journey starts with one step and so on. One caught my attention recently - *enjoy the little things in life because someday you will realise they were the big things.*

We can take a lot of things for granted, often the very things that deserve our gratitude. We do this with both people and possessions, always with the assumption that whenever we need someone or something, they or it will be there. We often hear that we don't know what we've got until it's gone. The truth is, we knew what we had, it never really occurred to us that we'd ever lose it!

Taking things for granted means that we make the extraordinary things in our lives to be very ordinary. But the ordinary is holy, sacred. We call something sacred because it brings us into touch with God. The ordinary is filled with mystery, wonder, marvel, and even the miraculous. Giving ourselves time to stop and reflect is never wasted, time to allow ourselves to understand that we don't know everything, we don't control everything, that the seeds of joy, happiness, satisfaction lie in the ordinary, everyday. Unfortunately, most of the time we don't see this because we try to claim it, own it, mould it to what we want, develop it, make money out of it, or just use it without much thought. When Jesus told us to become 'as little children', perhaps He might have been asking us to ponder and to wonder, like little children, to ask questions and just enjoy what we have.

Theologian Karl Rahner was once asked whether he believed in miracles. "I don't believe in them," he replied, "I rely on them to get me through daily life!" What are the daily miracles in my own life? Just waking up in the morning, being able to see and hear, to taste and feel – having companionship, friendship, someone to love and being loved, having food and shelter..... but there are other gifts - my need of others for example.

"In my weakness is my strength," St Paul writes (2 Cor. 12:10). Sr Joan Chittister wrote:

I never understood that passage nor did I like it until, struck with polio as a young woman, I began little by little to realise that if I ever walked again, it would not be thanks to me, it would be thanks to everyone around me who formed the human chain that kept me human. When I could not move, they carried me. When I could not work, they found functions for me that justified my existence. When I could not find a reason for going on, they liked me enough to give me back a sense of human connectedness.

There are times in our lives when we become very dependent on other people, in times of sickness or in times of loneliness or bereavement or just when we discover that we are not a stand-alone, self-sufficient super-person. We need other people, their gifts, their love, generosity, compassion, patience, wisdom. Other people need me - they have a claim, as it were, on my own gifts when they need me as I have needed them.

We come to realise that we are gifted firstly by what we can do for others and secondly in my need for others. That's what Paul is trying to tell us!

It can be hard to appreciate just how much we need other people and, in turn how much we are responsible for others, how much they need us. Today that responsibility can amount to signing internet petitions or copying and pasting of social network statuses or messages or signing up to social media sites to facilitate collective action or advocacy. They have their place. Such actions make us feel some sense of satisfaction, that we have 'contributed' to a cause and they can contribute to political or moral pressure. Often these activities are all collected under the rather pejorative term "Slacktivism." Generally, they tend to require minimal personal effort from the slacktivist.

Such responses are less helpful if they encourages us to think of 'poverty' or injustice or racism or whatever else we are asked to sign up for/against primarily as a problem to be solved, a cause to be fought and won. In recent times we have had wars against poverty, drugs, terror, cancer, ISIS, against... well you name it! There was even a war against war movement! The trouble is that makes it look as if poverty, or terror or cancer or whatever is an enemy, a thing to be destroyed. It tends to de-humanise those who are poor or those who are suffering under or fleeing from terrorist movements or those who are addicted to drugs or who are ill or in disadvantage.

But any such war is about people. It is not a war to defeat something but it is above all about recognizing the humanity of people who are disadvantaged and recognising our own humanity, our solidarity with them. People in poverty, addicted to drugs or living in terror have the same dreams, similar needs and the same desires to live as the people who are not. Some desires may be heightened or intensified but we all want to live in peace, safety, freedom and harmony – those gifts you and I enjoy virtually every day.

When we come to some personal acquaintance or understanding of the lives of people who are disadvantaged or suffering or oppressed, we shall come to see them not just as a cause or problem to be solved. Then we may be prepared to accept responsibility for such people if we know them as persons and not as some media-created image.

We can't possibly know everyone, but we can come to know ourselves – our strengths and weaknesses, our hopes and dreams, what we love, what motivates us, where we fall down and something about our faults. In so doing we may come to understand others, we may come to understand that we share a common humanity with them, that they are not unlike us. Then will we go out to other people and help them realise their hopes and dreams just as we can.

Regards
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