

January 2012

Never too late to begin

Every new start is an experience of God in our lives

While the New Year's Janus, the two-faced Roman god of gates and doorways, is always depicted as staring unrelentingly at the past and into the future, our God of Epiphany is embraced as forever creating new possibilities from within the womb of the present. I like to think of January, my birth month, as the month of courageous beginnings. There is something of the child about January. We sense at this time the stirring of eternal newness. The earth itself seems to be breathing more deeply in anticipation of spring.

Short of nature itself, there is nothing that epitomises the constant condition of readiness for new beginnings more than childhood does. Children's delight in exploring the possible to its limits is the sacrament of God's creative spirit at work in their hearts. In a former parish, St Benedict's, we would remember how, in his famous Rule, the saint spoke to the young hearts of his monks. He began: 'Listen, my child, with the ear of your heart,' and ended, 'With Christ's help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners.'

In Crossings, Mark Barrett OSB quotes Zen Master Suzuki: 'In Japan we have the phrase shoshin, which means beginner's mind. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few.'

There is something about beginning, or beginning again, that stirs our hearts. The drive towards a new dawn is a pure gift of grace, an experience of God's continuing incarnation in our lives. God makes flesh the divine self every time we die and rise in that tight place between failure and hope. From within his own darkness, the poet Brendan Kennelly wrote:

*Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
That always seems about to give in
Something that will not acknowledge conclusion
Insists that we forever begin.*

The angels of beginning have no set thresholds through which to enter our lives, but wait at the edge of our experiences, whatever the decade. During any decade it is possible to begin a major voyage to the centre of our identity. Rebecca West reminds us that 'It is the soul's duty to be loyal to its own desires. It must abandon itself to its great passion.' The poet-potter M. C. Richards holds: 'The sin against the Holy Spirit is the sin against new life, against self-emergence, against the holy innerness of each person. It can be committed as easily against oneself as against another.'

Deep down, we are all masters of our own destinies. Whichever way we choose, our decision will have been gradually reached out of a series of small, repeated beginnings along the way of our lives. Even if we have opted too often for the secure, for the burial of that one talent, there is still hope. We are creatures of the light. 'We are God's seed,' preached Meister Eckhart, 'and God's seed must grow into God.'



Anais Nin wrote: 'And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.' But the sad and strange thing is that a point arrives when it is almost beyond us to change and begin again.

I remember a story about the pot-bound plant. The roots have nowhere to go but round and round the pot, eventually strangling and choking the plant. They are yearning to find more space and soil, just like our own tired, tangled energies.



But no matter how buried our precious lives and dreams, they never die completely. If we don't live life, life will live us. The forces of life and death are so powerful.

There is a quiet desperation in that silent battle when the fingers of first light touch the darkness, when love encounters despair. I once saw a father, with aching despair, look at his wayward son, who had lost out in his battle with drugs. It seemed to me that the father would have given his own life if it stirred that fragile flame to life again within his son's breast. How many mothers must have watched helplessly for the first small blush of health on their desperately ill baby's cheek?

And I remember a student who, unable to face her bulging 'letter-box' of demands, warnings and deadlines, attempted suicide. Standing by her hospital bed, how I longed to infuse her with the spirit and grit I knew she carried somewhere within her. But just then, a new beginning was beyond her. Yet relentlessly, whether faint or fiery, the deeper springs of life will disturb our winter sleep; something greater than our souls will keep attracting their attention. Aquinas defines humans as 'beings that desire' with God's own irrepressible desire within them.

In *The Buried Life*, Matthew Arnold wrote:

*But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
but often, in the din of strife,
there rises an unspeakable desire
after the knowledge of our buried life;
a longing to enquire
into the mystery of this heart which beats
so wild, so deep in us – to know
whence our lives come and where they go.*

January – the month of courageous beginnings. We grow or we die. The poet Goethe urges us: 'Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.' Beginning requires courage because of the strange forces lined up to prevent it happening.

W. H. Murray, the Himalayan hero, wrote: 'Concerning all beginnings there is an elementary truth: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. A whole stream of events which no man would have dreamt of will happen.'

Whenever your heart desires to begin another journey, the whole universe conspires to see you on your way.

