

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 8th May – THE ANGER OF A STRUGGLING HEART

I could feel the anger coming on. If he does not stop soon, I was thinking, I'm going to lose it. He didn't and I did. With little warning, the red mist struck.

It does not happen to me very often. I can count on one hand the number of times that I've exploded in company. Strangely enough, I haven't ever regretted those out-of-control moments. There was always something real about them. When such outbursts happened I have felt the hard thrill of truth, the brief satisfaction of being myself, the strange comfort of expressing my own real, though flawed, humanity.

As with many who are in the public eye, so much of my life, too, as a parish priest is about masks. The all-pervading clerical role so often takes over my human face. There is a constant struggle going on inside me. There are times when the expectations of others, of my early upbringing and of my own fearful obedience, almost suffocate my soul. Yet in each of those unexpected exchanges, when my normal self-control breaks down, I have felt a momentary release, as though liberated, for a moment, from some strait-jacket of conformity.

Like many other colleagues, in the course of our work, we fume inwardly. Too often, I'm conscious of an inner seething, a slow-burning resentment that is usually held firmly in check. This constant emotional control is costly in terms of good energy and overall health. At such times I can almost feel my arteries thickening, my hair whitening and the crows feet deepening around eyes and mouth.

But does it have to be this way for us priests, I often wonder. How many of our married parishioners are diminished by these debilitating tensions and passing encounters? I am well aware that marriage is not always a bed of roses. But is there a difference when it comes to coping with the kind of emotional moments I'm writing about. Does the wound, small though it may be in light of the huge suffering of the world, heal quicker when it is shared with a partner?

Supposing I come home from chairing a meeting where I'm harshly criticised or challenged. I'm feeling sorry for myself, badly done to and unfairly treated. With or without justification, I'm hurting. To be able to share this bit of pain with my partner, and to hear her say something like "Oh, forget it; everyone knows what Bernard is like!" or "I shouldn't worry about that remark. Susan says it to every new parish priest", how helpful and releasing would that be? Or have I got it all wrong? Do husbands and wives talk not like that to each other?

Even though we often present ourselves to our parishioners as confident, competent and self-sufficient men, however, if truth be known, we are, when done at night, in our often vast presbyteries, pathetically insecure. Without the comforting voice, touch, listening ear of another, we so easily magnify the ordinary incident into a highly-charged personal attack on our integrity or competence. Small wonder we often become awkward, neurotic, defensive or depressive. Without the normal, common-sense, street-savvy of my closest friends I would continually tend to magnify the trivial put-down into a major disgrace. It is only when priests trust each other as human beings that they hesitantly admit to such quiet desperation.

Once or twice when I have cried in trusted company, the cause of the tears had to do with the relentless effort to conform, to be right, to avoid criticism, to please the parishioners on the one hand, the authorities on the other. So often I have longed to find and use my own voice, to speak my own truth, to tell it as I see it. Enforced loyalty to the 'party line' is an exhausting demand that one day leads to a divided

heart. May I clarify something here. In my efforts to be authentic, to integrate the unpredictable dimensions of my life, to empty myself of unnecessary baggage so as to be of more use to others, I'm not recommending selfish or inappropriate behaviour. I'm simply pointing out that I've noticed some paradoxical kind of therapy around those times that I publicly lost my composure.

I struggle when I try to put into words what precisely that 'inner healing' actually is. Perhaps it reveals what is really going on deep down within us; a moment of stopping pretending, of something authentic inside us shouting 'Enough is enough; I can't take anymore!' Better an external breakout than an internal breakdown. All I'm exploring here is the human need to express our emotions. Unfortunately, if this does not happen in a civilized way, it tends to burst out at the wrong time.

Not so long ago I 'lost it' during that sensitive time just before Mass – the time when celebrants are desperately trying to hold everything together. A queue of people had lined up with the usual requests – pray for Mary's exam, plug the special collection, and, of course, can you sign a Mass card before you begin. Then came the last straw. "You forgot to mention my Grandma's anniversary last week, Fr." That did it. "Your problem," I said, "is that I'm not perfect. I'm a messed-up, forgetful, sinful person like everyone else." How extraordinarily difficult it is then to walk out on to the sanctuary to celebrate the Eucharist, to preach the homily with a loving power, after an encounter such as that!

I am working on strategies to cope with such emergencies. As you can see, they do not always work! In a nutshell, when the trigger-event happens, I remember to breathe consciously, mindfully. This is hugely important. It gives me enough space to create a tiny distance between the rising emotion and my rational response; enough room for the grace of choice. Beyond denial, fight or flight, I can now choose how I'm going to respond. And that is everything. I can transform the negative thing rather than transmit it. I can heal it rather than project it. That fleeting opportunity is a 'threshold moment'. It is Passover in miniature. Salvation in seconds.

To be called, by God's power, to be a liberator of souls, a healer of wounded hearts, is a breath-taking ministry. But today, I'm simply revealing a little of my weaker side. I'm now discovering that the more vulnerable I become as a human person, the more authentic I am as a priest. The light and the shadow – they need each other always; they dance together to give the colour to our lives. As Rainer Maria Rilke said, "If I manage to get rid of my demons, I fear my angels may leave as well." The amazing mystery of our complex humanity is not always the easiest cross to carry, or the most comfortable crown to wear.