

## Daniel's reflection for week beginning 6th March – ARE YOU TRYING TOO HARD TO BE GOOD?

I was 'doing supply' for my brother in the N Ward of a large hospital in Manchester. As 'acting chaplain' I was called out one night to a patient in deep distress. The reason given to me by the doctor was as follows. 'This patient is deeply disturbed by her sins and imperfections. She is convinced that she is not in the state of grace, whatever that may mean. Short of sedation, I can do nothing more for her. She has some obsession with being perfect. Only you may know the cause of her condition and therefore be able to do something about it.'

My guess was that the patient was suffering from a 'Catholic neurosis', a prolonged, anxious state brought on by intense bouts of scrupulosity. It is not so common now, thank God. It used to drive sensitive souls to distraction. I remember going back again and again, within one afternoon, to the same priest in the confession-box because I could not 'say my penance perfectly'. 'It's no good now,' he testily replied, 'it's only the first attempt that counts.'

Put in different ways now. "How do I become free?" "How can I put the past behind me and find a new way of living?" Such are the questions I hear every day. "I'm plagued by bad memories. How can I get rid of them?" "I seem to have little real joy in my life." Many people are looking for answers to these questions; they are searching for a happier life.

Sometimes I discuss with those troubled souls (and that means most of us) the possibility that we are trying too hard to be free of anxiety, fighting too fiercely against worry, trying too desperately to escape those hurting parts of ourselves. I suggest to them that, no matter what, there will always be a certain, difficult load to carry. To be human is to be flawed, to be in conflict, to be unfinished.

Very often what we need to do is to accept the way we are. I don't mean that we should wallow in our misery, become a doormat for others, settle for the half-life. But I do think that we often struggle too much, expecting the clouds to shift so that we can live, continually, in bright sunshine. Short of heaven, down here at any rate, 'they are not long, the days of wine and roses!'

At self-help retreats and healing weekends I often dwell on two approaches. The first is about accepting the way we are. Too much fighting with ourselves will only exhaust us, and we end up more flattened than when we began. And the second approach is about being realistic when it comes to our expectations. What I mean is that there is little point in trying to be perfect. Ordinary human beings just don't do perfection very well! Nor are we meant to. 'Perfection,' wrote Simone Weil, 'is sterile; it cannot have children.'

The first approach then is about accepting all that goes on inside us every day and night. Deep within, we are all a right old mixture of emotions and strange feelings. We are very complex and complicated people, and it is often the wise option to realise that, and to settle for that. We will never get rid of all our unwanted characteristics, holding on only to the pleasant and attractive ones.

What I mean is that we are just not created that way. When you think about it, we all need a shadow. There must be a kind of contrast in our lives. Otherwise, we would cease to exist. Or become angels. It is our shadowy bits that give the definition, the colour and the character to who we are. (Jesus and perfection and weeds, etc. God does not have a problem with our being imperfect. We do. Let me put it another way.)

All sunshine makes a desert. And nothing flows or grows in the harsh glare of the Sahara sun. The desert needs dark things and places and times for any kind of blossoming to happen. The same with us. We would never know light if we never experienced darkness. We could never know love if we never experienced fear. Nor would we ever forgive

if we had never been hurt. The challenge is not to get rid of the shadows and flaws and hurting bits; the challenge is to somehow recognise them, accept them, befriend them, recognise their usefulness, and then, integrate them into the rest of our lives.

That is the supreme task. That is the journey of our souls. That is what the greatest among us are always trying to do. Even Jesus swung and swayed, in intense torment, between giving in to and resisting his temptations, between refusing and accepting the chalice of his destiny. There is no other way to travel the inner journey, to pursue the grace of self-awareness, to achieve personal authenticity, to find our soul. We are only called to be ourselves, to be nobody else, to be grateful for the bagful of eccentric and often scary bits and pieces that make up our personalities. Only then can our beautiful and alluring qualities be seen to good effect.

When we struggle too hard to be perfect, we only lose heart quickly. When we attack the faults and foibles that crowd around the kitchen of our souls, we only make them stronger, more damaging and more subtle. Strangely enough, the best advice is to welcome them all into your heart. I like to believe that even the most fearful and threatening mini-monsters that prowl around the perimeters of our inside spaces are all bringing us some kind of gift. Maybe that is what Jesus meant when he said 'Love your enemies'. Or what the Eastern gurus mean by 'embracing your shadow'.

It may not be a very wise thing to do, then, to strive to cut out of ourselves those parts that cause us trouble. We don't cut out or cut off those members of our bodies that are unhealthy; we work towards their healing. It is that way too, with the things of the spirit. There is no point in accusing ourselves, in denying what is essential to us, in ripping out all that isn't 'good'. They all only grow again, return again, suddenly appear again, more threatening and aggressive than before. (The 7 demons – clean and neat, all swept up!)

So, beware of the compulsion to perfection. It is not what wisdom is about. It brings no peace. In fact, it often works the other way round! I read recently that when Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor set out for Rome to take part in the recent conclave to elect the new Pope, he packed a few of Jane Austen's novels for light reading. I wonder if he knew that before she died in 1817, the same Jane wrote, 'Repeated pictures of perfection, as you know, make me sick – and wicked!'

What I, myself, endeavour to do is to welcome the dark bits of myself and make friends with them. They are all a part of me. We need our demons as well as our angels to form the amazing and unique person that we are. Without the contrary energies and impulses within us, there would be little movement or dance. Jesus himself, and all our greatest role-models, had to live with and deal with the most frightening of counter-forces, temptations, doubts and devils. We, who may not be quite in their league, are no exception.

That is why self-awareness, to be present to ourselves and to each moment of our lives, is about as far as we can go. Whatever way we are, that is the way we are. When we get it right, we get it right. When we get it wrong, we get it wrong. Such are the shapes and colours of authenticity and honesty about our true feelings, motivations and the hidden workings of our mysterious minds. This kind of acceptance does not mean that we settle for less. It means that we settle for nothing less than reality and the truth. And, when we sit down for our daily few minutes of silent prayer, it is a very good place from which to begin.