

8 The Grace of Experience

It is often said that people are searching for meaning in their lives. But could it be rather that they are looking for evidence that they are really and truly alive?

A boy sat on the steps of a building with a battered hat by his feet. A cardboard sign read: "I'm blind. Please help." The hat held a few small coins. A man was walking by. He dropped a euro in the hat, picked up the sign, turned it around, wrote something on it, and put it back near the boy. Soon the hat began to fill up.

That afternoon, the man who had written the new words on the sign came back to see how things were. Recognising his footsteps, the boy said: "You are the one who changed my sign this morning. What did you write?" The man said he only wrote the truth, but in a different way from the boy's words. The new sign now read: "You are enjoying a beautiful day but I cannot see it."

Both signs told the people that the boy was blind. The first was simply a statement of fact. The second reminded the people of the gift of their sight. One was about knowledge; the other about personal experience. One about the mind; the other about the senses.

Knowledge alone, ideas and concepts do not change us profoundly. Pure experience does. It is always focused, concentrated and non-dualistic. It attracts, persuades and convinces. After it, we see things differently. This may be a song, a touch, a film, a story, a note of love.

Our experience is pure when we hold no filtering lens, no preconceived notions. You cannot really experience reality with the judgemental mind because you are dividing the moment before you give yourself to it. You are not free to receive. You are in control of the outcome. Your fearful mind is in charge; you are not yet vulnerable enough.

The poets knew well that nothing can match the power of authentic experience. "The secret of it all," wrote Walt Whitman, "is to write in the gush, the throb, the flood, of the moment – to put things down without deliberation or framing – without worrying about their style, without waiting for a fit time or place ... By writing at the instant, the very heartbeat of life is caught."

Seamus Heaney, too, knew this. "I rejoiced most when the poem seemed most direct, an upfront representation of the world it stood for ... I loved Gerard Manley Hopkins for the intensity of his exclamations which were always equations of a rapture and an ache I didn't fully know I knew until I read him. I loved Robert Frost for his farmer's accuracy and his wily down-to-earthness ..."

In their own way also, the mystics are great champions of human and spiritual experience. It is why they feel secretly sure about being chosen, invited and loved. In their efforts to explain their experience of God, they refer to an intense desire between themselves and their passionate lover. There are echoes of the Song of Solomon in these lines from "Draw Me After You" by St Clare of Assisi:

Draw me after You!
 We will run in the fragrance of Your
 perfumes,
 O heavenly Spouse!
 I will run and not tire,
 until You bring me into the wine-cellar
 until your left hand is under my head
 and your right hand will embrace me
 happily
 and You will kiss me with the happiest
 kiss of your mouth.

God became human experience: "What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed ... so that you also may have fellowship with us; and ... with the Father ..." (1 John 1:1-3).

When asked about the essence of his message, Jesus replied: "Come and see." Come for the day and experience the presence of my company. He gathered his life's passion into one moment of washing people's feet. He used the metaphors of bride and groom, weddings and intimacies, to explain the nature of union with God. All his words and works carried the experience of grace and the grace of experience. His own essential humanity was in evidence in that sensual experience of having his own feet washed by Mary's tears, dried by her hair and anointed with her fragrant ointment. In that sacramental moment of mutual presence, they both felt vulnerable, and they were both transformed.