

Daniel's Reflection for Week Beginning 21st February - Lenten Journey - Unblocking the Light

Spiritual writers suggest horizons by which to set our compass for the inner journey to the authentic self, a well-travelled route of the saints is the way of surrender. It is the relinquishing of control, the unseating of the proud ego. Even for the holiest of souls, this is almost impossible to do. Suffering has been described as that state when, for whatever reason, we no longer have control over our lives or our future.

We are terrified, for instance, when our health is beyond healing, when a love is beyond rekindling, when a damage done is irreparable, when our good name is irretrievably lost. To surrender, we fear, is to lose our sense of self, our self-sufficiency, our sense of worthiness – to become unbearably at the mercy of others. To purify our own ever-blessed essence is the reason for all our traditional Lenten practices of repentance, self-denial, almsgiving and prayer. Otherwise the elemental human split and stain within us only darkens more. In spite of our fallenness, what we are all unceasingly searching for is someone to surrender to, someone in whom we can define ourselves. 'God', writes Richard Rohr, 'is the only one we can surrender to without losing ourselves.' The irony is that we actually and finally do find ourselves, but now in a whole new and much larger field of meaning.

Once we die enough to our need to control, to be independent; once we allow the utterly transforming love of God to invade the deepest levels of our complicated souls, then we notice that we are moving to another place where many things begin to matter much less to us, and a few things begin to matter much more.

Another classic and connected counsel for serious Lenten pilgrims is a commitment to a painful metanoia, to a radical self-purification. We slowly begin to notice that fear and resentment block the nourishing light from restoring our souls. We start to realise that these negative, diminishing emotions are, in the words of the ash Wednesday readings, 'corroding the spirit'. This kind of dawning readiness and openness, with its guaranteed harvest of graces, is beyond the capacity of what St Thomas Aquinas called the *anima pusilla* – the small self, the false soul. Lent is a blessed season to discover the *anima magna* within us, the large soul. So many trappings of religion fall away at that most revealing moment, when we discover that beautiful soul, when we choose it, and decide to live it into our destiny. That is when the grace notes ring in our heart.

This moment has been described as the most courageous act of our lives; the personal passover for which we were born. But there is nothing automatic about it. Spiritual maturity nearly always emerges only from the experiences of futility, fall or failure. At such times, as we try to breathe into the fearful pain, we may hear an inner invitation into a deeply desired freedom. Our 'yes' to that invitation will play havoc with our daily routines, with the reign of the ego, and with our religious pretensions. It will make us think and feel about our faith in a way we never did before. It will purify and clarify our understanding of the Church, and a new, tender and demanding insight into the gospel of Jesus will captivate our hearts.

A final challenge to the soul is to discern the excessiveness in our lives – our congenital drive towards acquiring more, often in a mindless kind of greed . . . The story goes that Joseph Heller, author of *Catch 22*, was once told about a fund manager who made more money that very day than he did from all his books combined. Heller replied, 'Then I have something he will never have. enough.' Spiritual writer Mary Jo Leddy insists that at some point in Lent we must say, mean and live the following; 'It's enough. I have enough. I am enough. Life is enough. With all my heart I thank you.'

When it comes to personal authenticity and transparency, there are no short cuts, no cheap graces. Inner purity of heart has to be hewn out of the rocks of our resistance. Even for Jesus, the human one, there was a

terrible darkness during his 40 desert days. And there were cups of pain he gagged on. Being overwhelmed by God is a terrible experience.

'An encounter with the divine,' a mystic-friend of mine recently wrote, 'is not a gentle affair, filled with flowers and chirping birds. It is like being woken up by an earthquake. It shakes us to the very core of our being, crushes our pretence. God topples the false temples of our lives.'

Emily Dickinson puts it this way:

*He stuns you by Degrees –
Prepares your brittle nature
For the ethereal Blow ...
Then nearer – Then so – slow –*

*Your Breath – has time to straighten –
Your Brain – to bubble cool –
Deals One – imperial thunderbolt –
That scalps your naked soul.*

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