

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 31st October - WE NEED TO CHERISH OUR FLAWS

I received Selena into the Church twelve years ago. When Selena was a small girl she loved to wear her grandmother's shoes. One day she fell and cut her leg. The wound needed some stitches. It healed in its own time. Selena is now 23. We met again recently. We talked about that moment in her young life. She said she still had the scar. Instead of disappearing, it grew as she grew, becoming more special as she herself became more special. She showed it to me, with some pride. It was now a valued part of her. It seemed to define who she was; a vital part of her story, the symbol of her uniqueness, an essential aspect of her attractiveness. It was, indeed, a perfect scar.

There has always been ambiguity and mystery around the wound, the flaw, the weakness. Thomas Aquinas describes our darkest bits as necessary for the full appreciation of God's light. We always live in the middle of this paradox of dark and light, of fragment and wholeness. And no one can be sure of the outcome. 'Life breaks all of us,' wrote Hemingway, 'but some people grow at the broken places.'

We speak about the flaw in the oyster as the birthplace of the pearl; about the wound in the soul where the flawed genius or the wounded healer is born; about the ubiquitous shadow wherein evil lurks or where an astonishing transcendence takes place. The battle of opposites may be waged in public or in the secret recesses of each human heart. The greater the gift, the greater the flaw. And therefore, the greater the intensity of the deadly duel. We can trace the pathos of this strange encounter in the victories and tragedies of those we knew – in the final grit and faith of a John Paul 11, or in the fatal self-destruction of geniuses such as Beethoven or Presley.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado had a dream about the potential of his failings:

*Last night while I was sleeping
I dreamed – blessed illusion! –
I had a beehive inside my heart,
And from my old bitterness the gold bees
Were contriving white combs
And sweet honey.*

There is something about the phenomenon of weakness and shadow that is almost sacred. The primitive people had the highest reverence for the mystery of the wound, of the missing piece. Can God be God, they asked, where everything is finished, complete, perfect? Hence the tradition of the inserting, of the etching, painting or stitching in, of a deliberate, disfiguring flaw, in early Amerindian, Celtic and Japanese art. In *Grace and Necessity*, Archbishop Rowan Williams writes, 'Jacques Maritain speaks of finite beauty, or finishedness in the work, being always incomplete at some level, 'limping', like Jacob, with the encounter with what cannot be named; achieved art always has that kind of imperfection through which infinity wounds the finite.'

And, when it comes to our own raw need for help during our moments of quiet desperation, we do not always turn to the local paragon of virtue. We seek someone who has been lost too, but not completely; someone acquainted with failure, but who keeps trying. We ask for someone who has fallen often, but who refuses to stay down. Is it not true, more often than not, that we trust people more for their vulnerability than for their virtue? Are some people too strong for us, too perfect to understand us? We never feel judged by those who have befriended their own darkness. Is it not often said that sinners are drawn more by the brokenness of the recovering alcoholic priest than by the squeaky-cleanliness of the professional cleric. 'He is one of us, now,' they say 'we're safe, and saved, with him'?

In his very first homily Benedict XVI said, 'The Pope must be conscious of being a frail and weak man, since his strength is frail and weak, constantly needing purification and conversion.' He was well aware that it was his powerlessness that was his strength; without his awareness of that essential flaw, his reign would be of little value. He would be too strong for the rest of us. He would have nothing in common with those he served. He could never pray with St Paul – he with his thorn of the flesh - 'when I'm weak then I'm strong.' It is his flawed nature that empowers him through grace. 'He is breaking me down into his own oblivion,' wrote D.H. Lawrence, 'to send me forth on a new morning, a new man.'

How important it is for us, then, to be faithful to the *via negativa*; to remain silent and humble before the mystery of God. And how dangerous it is to be too arrogantly certain about 'God's will' as though we knew the Creator's mind. There is an apophatic darkness that will forever confound and confuse us. God's ways are most certainly not ours. Divine light, when incarnated, so often emerges as darkness; and God's perfection, when enfleshed, is found only in fragility! Even in heaven that same frail human body of Christ still shines with raw wounds. The flaw too is glorified.

Nowhere is the central place of an indisputably flawed moment celebrated more extravagantly than during the rituals of *the Triduum*. Immediately after mourning the awful death of Jesus on the Good Friday hill, we praise the very reason for this destruction of innocence. Within hours we are exulting in an Exultet that proclaims the divine necessity of humanity's first flaw - *O felix culpa; O necessarium Adaepeccatum*. Our peak liturgical moment sings of a sin. St Thomas Aquinas believed that 'if all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe'.

On Holy Saturday, when this crucified Jesus descended into Hell, he consecrated the roots of our flaws from the inside, making them, forever, the possible sources of his newly risen life. Is not that why St Paul assures us that even our worst sins can paradoxically reveal a graced awakening? How often we misread those epiphanies of opportunity, those near occasions of grace! We label things too soon. 'Out beyond right and wrong,' wrote Rumi, 'there's a field. I'll meet you there.'

A few years ago I slipped into Trinity College, Dublin to watch a rare performance of J.M.Syngue's first and briefest play *When the Moon Sets*. A young nun, allowed home for a funeral, falls in love with her distant cousin. Before returning to the convent she spent the days and nights in desperate prayer for guidance. 'May God forgive me,' she finally whispers to the young man, 'I will stay with you.' He replies, 'Why do people ask for God's forgiveness for the most divine things they ever do?'

There was a Russian Orthodox parishioner who, every chance she got, would bend Metropolitan Anthony's ear about her progress in sanctity, her accumulation of virtues and her eradication of vices. On his annual Easter visit, she collared him again. 'I have all the virtues now, Bishop' she triumphantly blurted out, 'and only one vice left.' Metropolitan Anthony paused for a moment. He looked at her carefully. 'For God's sake, woman,' he earnestly whispered; 'hang on to that vice.'

She who wants to have right without wrong

Order without disorder

Does not understand the principles

Of heaven and earth

She does not know how

Things hang together.

(Chuang Tzu fourth cent. BC)

Jesus never stopped warning us about getting it all wrong. We are congenital judges of others. With our myopic take on things, we cannot really distinguish grace from sin, gift from flaw. 'Don't rush to pull the darn out too soon,' he warned, 'Let the weeds and wheat grow together. God will figure it all out on the last day.'

The day before the Bishop's visit to our parish a few of us were clearing up around the Church. As we came upon a patch of green and growing things, Tony, with his hoe at the ready, asked me 'Are these weeds or flowers?' That night I dreamt I was dying and looking at the patch-work quilt of my life spread out behind me. I was filled with wonder because everything was revealed to be quite different to what I thought.

*The weakest patterns came from my proudest moments,
and my deeds of goodness were the most threadbare of all.*

*The finest colours, it was revealed to me,
were mixed at night, without permission.*

*And the shapes of beauty, only now so fitting,
were drawn with my left hand – wild and pagan.*

*And then I saw it - a shy and shining thread of gold –
(and remembered telling it in confession),
a moment that was unknowingly divine.*

(Tablet article)