

Ballyvaloo

17 August 2021

Welcome

The last 18 months have been seriously weird for us all at different levels. There was the disruption of life and work, relationships and friendships and the suspension of the future. We have adjusted to “conditional living” – planning, but depending on how the virus and its variants evolve. A good deal depends on how many take the vaccine and on how long people can put up with living in suspension. For many, there has been significant loss in sickness and bereavement. The disturbance of religious practice has been marked and lately controversial. The pandemic has accelerated the decline of faith and the practice of the faith.

Topic

A good question to ask is how do we, how do I, deal with such loss? How have I managed throughout.

Steps

Before responding to that let me expand a little further. When we entered religious life, having someone in the church was considered an asset. As a body, religious and clergy were genuinely held in the warmest regard. As we know, there has been a total turn-around. The golden age was not at all as golden as it looked. In retrospect, the core looks rotten. There was certainly arrogance and abuse of power; there was a very dark side of sexual abuse and institutional incarceration; often the experience within orders was harmful for the members themselves. I won't detail the horrible stories of sexual abuse, the Magdalen laundries and devastating practices such as the Tuam babies. People do wonder if you or your group were involved in anything horrible. Even if we did nothing, there is a kind of group shame.

In a way, the assets have been stripped. All the real good has been overshadowed by the evil of some and by institutional, systemic malaise. You could be forgiven for thinking that your past has been taken away and, with the drastic drop in vocation, the future as well. You might even begin to wonder if you had done any good at all, was it all a waste, a delusion? So, it is not just the wretched pandemic; we stand among the smoking ruins.

Can we learn from St Paul? He experienced shattering losses in his life. As a Pharisee of good education under Gamaliel, he could have looked forward to being a force for good and status within his faith. Because of Christ, he suffered the loss of all things. He might have had a decent earning capacity; instead, he takes up tent-making, manual labour, so as not to depend on those who have much less than he ever had. He puts himself fully at the services of the Gospel. This commitment came at significant cost to himself. Every so often in his letters, we come across what is called hardships lists. Our reading today talks about things Paul has had to let go of. The fullest hardship list is as follows:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am talking like I am out of my mind!) I am even more so: with much greater labours, with far more imprisonments, with more severe beatings, facing death many times. Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with a rod. Once I received a stoning. Three times I suffered shipwreck. A night and a day I spent adrift in the open sea. I have been on journeys many times, in dangers from rivers, in dangers from robbers, in dangers from my own countrymen, in dangers from Gentiles, in dangers in the city, in dangers in the wilderness, in dangers at sea, in dangers from false brothers, in hard work and toil, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, many times without food, in cold and without enough clothing. Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxious concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:22-28 NET)

In contemporary terms, how does he “process” all this? His response can be mapped in three ways. Paul is the great teacher of faith – meaning trust in the faithfulness of God. Perhaps Romans 4 is the richest presentation. He also believes in God’s grace and providence. Here the best example must be 2 Corinthians 12 where he talk about the thorn in the flesh to keep in humble. Paul prayed earnestly about this three times. The voice says, “my grace is enough for you.” And such a word from God was enough for Paul. But Paul’s most eloquent word is in today’s reading: the experience of loss becomes a means of identifying with Jesus’ death and resurrection. In other words, the experience is not ignored nor simply endured. It becomes a kind of royal road to communion with Christ. Just as Jesus on the cross extended God’s grace to all humanity by his compassionate solidarity, likewise Paul or any believer can become a participant in this extraordinary compassion and solidarity.

As Paul says in Galatians, the life I now live in the body, I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:20). And in our reading, even more clearly: My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:10-11).

Peroratio

As one of you noticed, Paul sets the bar very high. Still, he can stand as an example of how to turn the ashes of difficult experiences and bitter losses into the gold of God’s grace. He challenges us to make redemptive use of all that we have been through and are still going through.