

Along the track

Open and Listening

I read a thought provoking article recently written by a person who described himself as an Irish Catholic by baptism, culture, and upbringing but one who is “lapsed but listening,” though still a “sceptic”. Others in that same article describe themselves as “believing without belonging”. There is another category “longing without belonging” mostly used about those who are searchers but who are not touched by present Church language. Some time ago, I listened to a group who described themselves as ‘Catholics in remission’. Others though are still practising, still believing, still finding a place in their church and still finding it to be a sign of hope.

So how would you describe how you are situated? It’s worth reflecting on where you find yourself and why and how you have come to that position. Did you make a conscious and informed decision or perhaps just ‘drift’ into this situation?

Jesus met people where they were, so to speak. He loved those who came to him, those with faith and those who struggled. He didn’t make judgments or refuse to deal with the non-believer, those who were sceptics or even those who were hostile. How they reacted to him, to his invitation was up to them. There was a rich young ruler who went away sad, carrying his sadness with him. Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector was called down from out of his sycamore tree so that Jesus might dine with him in his home. Both Zacchaeus and the rich young ruler were wealthy men, but one was self-important and would not give up his possessions, while the other gave half his possessions to feed the poor. Lepers came when they were told that shouldn’t and others regarded as sinners and outcasts stepped forward, people of other faiths and none came – the centurion, the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary who came seeking forgiveness and healing became a lifelong follower. The hostile leaders of his own faith were so entrenched in their own righteousness they could not hear. Jesus welcomed, challenged, loved, healed, encouraged or simply walked with people as they struggled, as he did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Is there any reason to think he would not do that now?

Jesus constructed His parables and stories so that his listeners could find their own entry point, their own level of appreciation, their own invitation. There is the richly layered story of the Good Samaritan,

which is an invitation to discipleship through acceptance and caring for others, the Prodigal Son offers an image of the forgiving God who seeks us out, displacing the images that cripple faith – God the Solemn Bore, God the Pointing Finger of Displeasure, God the Unconcerned, God who totals up our sins and failures. The parable of the generous farmer who stills sows despite the challenges of the ground where the seed may fall, the generous landowner who rewards the workers in the vineyard no matter what hour of the day they joined the workforce and so the list goes on. They are timeless stories that invite us to reflect and ask us how they might be speaking to us.

Jesus’ parables have one other thing in common. They are all about encounters of the heart. Today faith is no longer thought of as mainly an intellectual assent to truth, but as a relational journey to God with Jesus as our companion.

Bishop Greg O’Kelly SJ suggested that the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24) is a classic model for us. *Two disciples were walking away from faith in the Christ who had failed their hopes, who had been smothered by the world, and they were moving on to find other purposes. A stranger joins them. He asks them their story. They tell their stories, expressing the deeper movements of disillusion and dejection that now occupied them. The stranger does not admonish them for their failure to understand, or dispute their experience. He challenges their interpretations, and gives them other lights and lenses through which to view their experience. He says things that make their hearts burn with them, and He throws light on what was happening to them as they journeyed along their road. He seemed about to move off, but having experienced something deep in His presence, they invite Him to come back and stay with them. For a moment they recognise Him in the breaking of the bread. And then He disappears again. Because He is faithful, He will certainly come back if they stay open and listening.*

Staying open and listening, taking time to reflect, to take Jesus’ message to heart is as important as ever. Grace enters through the heart.

Regards
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