

## Footprints of grace

When I was at school the fashion was to have little 'autograph books' – some of you may remember these – in which our friends would write messages of friendship and 'wisdom'. One of these little deep and meaningful gems that someone wrote in mine was this rhyming verse: 'Your life lies before you like a field of untrodden snow, be careful how you walk it for every mark will show'. There is much wisdom in this! As the years go by we see that every mark does indeed show, and the question each of us must ponder is this: what kind of marks am I leaving? What are my footprints?

As we look back over the history of humankind we see so many footprints. There are footprints which are scars: footprints of destruction and pain, of suffering and hurt abounding. We see footprints of self-indulgence and self-centredness, footprints of greed and the marks of poverty inflicted upon others as a result. We see bad decisions, with future consequences on both personal and large scale levels. We can go on, naming the many ways we diminish life and leave a trail of sadness and pain and suffering. But there are also magnificent footprints: legacies of creativity, art, music, drama, literature, theology, philosophy, technology; legacies of prayer, philanthropy and humanism, compassion and justice; legacies of hope and triumph over misfortune and despair. As with the shadow side, the list is extensive. But what makes these footprints different from the former is that these are God's traces. These are footprints of grace.

As that part of creation come to conscious self-awareness, as the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner puts it, humans reflect upon and come to some understanding of their potential and role in life. We are able to stand back from the flow of creation, the flow of life of which we are part, and ask questions about our origin, our destiny and questions of meaning and purpose. In our Christian tradition we understand ourselves to be 'of God': 'in the image of God, God created them, male and female God created them' (Genesis 1:27). Our aliveness is nothing less than the breath of God: 'then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being' (Genesis 2:7). This magnificent and awe-inspiring understanding of the nature of humanity is what leads us to say that humanity is graced and blessed. And from this perspective, we discern our purpose. As bearers of the Divine life we are called to creativity, to create with God, co-operate with God, partner God in creating and sustaining life. And just as God 'looked' at all that God created and said 'it is good' (Genesis 1), so too must we, entrusted as we are with the work of co-creation, be able to look at what we bring into being and say, 'it is good', it is 'of God'. We must leave footprints of grace.

To leave footprints of grace we must become channels of grace ourselves. As St Paul says in his letter to the early church community in Ephesus: 'Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us' (Ephesians 5:1). And just a few verses earlier he said: 'So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:25 – 32).

And then Paul goes on several verses later to exclaim: 'Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true' (Ephesians 5:9).

These words are indeed a map of grace, a blueprint. Our thoughts, words, actions, attitudes, all leave their mark. Leaving the marks of grace is about living the moral life. And the moral life is a life in which the Last Supper is enacted daily. It is a life in which we 'take and eat', and then we ourselves take that bread of life out to others. It is about living in intimacy with Christ, for there we are nourished and nurtured, there we are shaped. It is St Dominic who said, 'Give to others the fruits of your contemplation'. Inasmuch as we gaze upon the face of the Sacred and allow this vision to be the eyes through which we look upon the world, we will slowly allow a space to emerge within our being and our actions, a place of grace, a place which is the source of all we do and bring into the world.

The bread of life that we take out into the world is peace, justice, right relationship, all that we understand as love. Wherever we leave a mark through a gesture of peace towards someone close to us, or through working for peace on a grand scale through justice or negotiation in places of conflict, we bring grace into our world. In our Christian Tradition we have an amazing prayer that we may sometimes take for granted because of its familiarity, and that is The Lord's Prayer. Pondering this prayer we see that it is a prayer of radical surrender. Every line of this prayer asks for surrender to God, transformation. Timothy Radcliffe is a Dominican friar and in his book, *Sing A New Song: The Christian Vocation*, he quotes St Thomas who says that praying the Our Father 'gives shape to our whole affective life', for in praying that God's will be done and that the kingdom come, our hearts are remade. To pray the Our Father is truly to live the Last Supper, day by day, wherever we are. Let all that I am and all that I do, be 'of You, Lord', we are saying.

To leave traces of God in our world we need to hunger for that bread ourselves, the bread which is Life. We need to pray each day to be made hungry. Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right for they shall be filled' (Matthew 5:6). Without this hunger for God, for Life and Light and Goodness, for what is right, we may be tempted to feast on other things and so leave other kinds of marks, other kinds of footprints.

To leave footprints of grace we need to become people of prayer - not occasional prayer, but constant, daily prayer. St Paul says that we should pray without ceasing. That doesn't mean we are to always be on our knees or always uttering words of prayer, but it does mean that we live, so to speak, 'on our knees'. Prayer is really a stance we take in life. It is simply that constant surrender to God - it is to live with 'folded hands' and 'bended knee'. We need to create environments, both inner and outer, in which we can hear. Meister Eckhart, the thirteenth century Dominican mystic, says that 'the very best and noblest attainment in this life is to be silent and let God work and speak within'. Then we shall be softened and moulded into a holy shape. Our very being itself will become a footprint of grace.

To leave footprints of grace we need to be hooked by love. And again Meister Eckhart has a beautiful image: 'For love resembles the angler's hook. The angler cannot get the fish until it is caught on the hook. He who hangs onto this hook is caught so fast that foot and hand, mouth, eyes and heart, and all that is this person's, belongs only to God. Just watch for this hook so as to be blessedly caught, for the more you are caught, the more you are free'. All that is this person's, belongs only to God! As I write this I am thinking of a truly remarkable young woman who died in Auschwitz in 1943 at the age of twenty-nine. Etty Hillesum has left us her diaries and this is one of her entries, written from inside the horror of Westerbork:

'You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes when I stand in some corner of the camp, my feet planted on your earth, my eyes raised towards Your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion and gratitude. At night, too, when I lie in my bed and rest in you, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face and that is my prayer. I have been terribly tired for several days, but that too, will pass; things come and go in a deeper rhythm and people must be taught to listen to it, it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life. I am not challenging You, oh God, my life is one great dialogue with You. I may never become the great artist I would really like to be, but I am already secure in you, God. Sometimes I try my hand at turning out small profundities and uncertain short stories, but I always end up with just one single word; God. And that says everything and there is no need for anything more. All my creative powers are transformed into inner dialogues with You. The beat of my heart has grown deeper, more active and yet more peaceful, and it is as if I were all the time storing up inner riches'.

Etty's short life journey - in fact the spiritual journey she has left in her diaries spanned only three years - shows a woman who came to belong wholly to God. She was 'caught' and she was free. She was a channel of grace in a brutal world of despair and horror and she has left that footprint for us.

To leave footprints of grace is to tread the path of forgiveness. Forgiveness replaces the marks of hurt and violence with the tenderness of peace and relationship. And again, as Radcliffe points out, when we forgive we are living the Last Supper. He says, 'The forgiveness of the Last Supper is not primarily about forgetting. It does not reassure us that our God is willing to overlook our mistakes, to look the other way. It is a deeply creative act of healing. Forgiveness is not what enables us to forget. It makes memory possible. It is the mystery of the ever fertile God who, in the mediaeval image made the dead wood of the cross blossom with flowers, and can make our dead lives flourish'.

Where dead lives flourish we see traces of God. Hurt, old grudges, resentment, bitterness, retaliation, do nothing but fester. They flourish and grow profusely, they take on a life of their own when we won't let go of them, and the marks of pain abound. But forgiveness is grace.

Forgiveness transforms, it heals the wounds and brings blessed relief. 'If today you hear His voice harden not your hearts', says the psalmist (Psalm 95). No wonder Jesus said that we are to forgive each other 'seventy times seven' - in other words, repeatedly, endlessly.

At the heart of Christianity is the invitation to immerse ourselves in the abundant forgiveness of God. It is an invitation to wholeness, to reclaim, day by day, whenever we wander, the dignity and sacredness of who we are. And as we come to the source and drink from that fountain of Divine forgiveness and renewal we too are asked to be the face of forgiveness for others. In fact, in that radical prayer of ours, we ask to be forgiven by God only as much as we forgive others who have wronged us. But let us never forget the initiative is all God's. The invitation is always given. Radcliffe says: 'The deepest truth of our human nature is not that we are greedy and selfish but that we hunger and thirst for God and in God we will find each other.' What grace-filled words: In God we will find each other! Day by day, in the ordinariness of our interactions, our words, our passing of each other as we go about our business, the pulse of grace is at work. All we have to do is surrender to it. And we will leave its footprints.

To leave footprints of grace is to walk alongside the poor. The key word is 'alongside'. It is about compassion, to 'suffer with', and it means that we do to others as we would like them to do to us. With this to mark our way we can let go of all sorts of political, social and economic rationalization that would leave footprints other than that of 'the preferential option for the poor', as our Church teaches. This Catholic Social Justice teaching will guarantee that all our choices, our economic, social and political systems, will become footprints of grace. As Pope Francis said, we must be a poor church for the poor. But we have a long way to go yet.

To leave footprints of grace is to tread gently upon the earth. One of the first 'commands' to humanity is this: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1:28). This is also interpreted by some scholars as the first blessing of humanity as the words preceding this are, 'God blessed them and said ...'. We are blessed with procreation, we participate in it with God, and we are blessed with a relationship with the earth. Sadly, the translation 'subdue' the earth has been taken to mean exploit, use, abuse as you will and we have inherited the destructive footprint of that approach. The more accurate translation is, 'to work with', 'to make hospitable,' so that life may be supported and sustained. And having now been to the place where these texts were written and seen the land in all its rugged, wild and alluring beauty, I can clearly see how necessary this was: a barren, rugged, wilderness area, with patches of lushness, needing to be 'tamed' and befriended, worked with, to be able to live there. We need to reclaim this. Ecological sensitivity, concern for the destruction of species, working to overcome pollution and tending the earth are holy paths to walk. And along those paths we find those footprints of grace.

This is our deepest identity – to be a channel of grace – and to leave behind us, day by day, in small and big ways, those traces of God. And we can do it if we take to heart these words of St Paul:

Do not quench the Spirit.

May the God of peace sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless.

The one who calls you is faithful and will do this. (1 Thessalonians 5:19, 23-24)

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