

Teach us to be gentle

This reflection was first published in 2014 and although it makes reference to the events of that time, our world continues to suffer through violence.

In the Roman Catholic Mass, as part of the introductory words to the penitential act – that part of the liturgy where we look at ourselves in the light of God’s love and God’s invitation to us to grow into that love and goodness – the celebrant invites us to draw close to God, “for he is full of gentleness and compassion”. I have always loved those words. *God is full of gentleness*. The invitation is warm and comforting. The words elicit trust, inspiring confidence and peace, a soothing balm for the hurts of life, those arising from both within and without. Our world is greatly in need of gentleness. This past week we have been reeling with the violence done to our fellow human beings – the violence of the downing of Malaysian Flight MH17 and the violence in Gaza and Israel. The Palestinian death toll has now reached 700 and the Israelis are suffering death and casualties too. Unspeakable horror, in both cases, inflicted upon people who lived and loved, whose lives were deeply entwined with others in relationships of friendship, love and care, who had dreams and plans and gifts to bring to our world. Sadly, the violence done to these, our sisters and brothers, has been increased through hampered recovery efforts in the case of the airliner tragedy and sharp words of blame and revenge. As we watch the unfolding of such horror, we are moved to shock, outpourings of sadness, confusion, outrage.

And yet there is that insistent affirmation: *He is full of gentleness and compassion*.

We need to speak gentleness, seek gentleness, act gentleness, choose gentleness. Violence can never be stopped through more violence. And why not? Because in a violent response, the very act condemned, the violence itself, is the means of the condemnation. It breeds further resentment and greater wrongs to be righted, more deep-seated grudges to be addressed. Fire cannot be overcome with fire. It must be quenched. A response to violence with violence loses its moral authority. ‘Do what I say and not what I do’, is the confused message. Jesus spoke very clearly about this. “If someone slaps you on the cheek offer the other”, he said. This is not a response of weakness or timidity, nor does it suggest that violence is acceptable; rather it is an invitation to break the cycle of violence. Don’t respond in kind. Another kind of response is needed. And Jesus himself modelled that other kind of response too. Remember Peter, drawing his sword and cutting off the soldier’s ear when they came to arrest Jesus. He was rebuked for that. Another kind of strength is needed.

Gentleness is not weakness. Gentleness is a great power. It is the power to not respond in like manner to violence and brutality. “Nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength”, said Saint Francis de Sales. Cruelty and destruction and retaliation do not reveal strength. They simply reveal a heart which has become entangled in the violence it has suffered itself, a heart which has allowed violence to be its teacher. Perhaps for some there is something satisfying in the logic of returned violence. Perhaps it is seen as the only response to the diminishment they have suffered, a reclaiming of their autonomy and rights and dignity by returning in kind. But the truth of this is that it is in fact a *loss* of dignity. It is a confused power. Real autonomy and dignity come from being able to

discern what will truly enhance and secure our humanity, what will express our dignity as a human being. To secure our dignity we need to choose what builds up rather than what diminishes.

Failing to return violence for violence is often perceived as weakness. But how far from the truth that is. Jerry Bridges, in *The Practice of Godliness*, writes: “Both gentleness and meekness are born of power, not weakness. There is a pseudo-gentleness that is effeminate, and there is a pseudo-meekness that is cowardly. But a Christian is to be gentle and meek because those are Godlike virtues... We should never be afraid, therefore, that the gentleness of the Spirit means weakness of character. It takes strength, God’s strength, to be truly gentle”. And Bridges is right when he speaks of “the gentleness of the Spirit” for, as St Paul teaches us in his letter to the Galatians, one of the fruits of the Spirit is gentleness. When we allow God to have God’s way with us and guide and inspire our responses, we will choose to be gentle.

I am deeply heartened and in awe of a priest in Gaza, Fr Jorge Hernandez, who, after three missiles landed near his church, has chosen to remain there amid the rubble with the people he serves and loves. And there, on the piles of shattered stones, he celebrates the Eucharist. Amidst the remains of brutality and violence the most powerfully gentle act takes place. The power of God becomes the fragility of bread and wine. It is an act that brings the tenderness and healing of Love into a place of despair and pain. That is real strength and real power.

In 1939, King George VI spoke these words in his Christmas broadcast: “I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown’. And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light and safer than a known way’”. These words were spoken into the darkness and brutality of World War II. And they speak to us today. If we do indeed put our hand into the hand of God we will be led to and alongside Jesus, and we will be led to the cross. As we gaze upon the cross at the crucified Jesus we see just what destructive human power can do, just because it can, and just because it seems expedient to exercise that power. As we look upon the crucifixion we see the extent to which the human heart can go – we see unfettered violence as the human heart gives in to it, but we also see the extreme of love in the surrender of the heart to Absolute Love. And that is our guide. As we put our hand into the hand of God we will certainly be led into the strength of gentleness, the strength of the non-violence of Jesus whose response was, “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing”.

The world is unfair. Terrible things happen to good people, innocent people. There is no logic of cause and effect working here. The faces of those beautiful Palestinian children who have lost their lives this past week testify to that. The stories of the 298 people, including 80 children, who boarded flight MH17 testify to that. They are the innocent ones who have become caught up in a foreign war, in revenge and violence not their own. The crucifixion of Jesus was unfair. His goodness did not spare him. It took him all the way to the cross. “People cry out under a load of oppression; they plead for relief from the arm of the powerful”, said Job, almost two and a half thousand years ago (Job 35:9). And it is as true today as it was then. This week our world has witnessed the arm of the ‘powerful’ and our world weeps. The tender arm that will embrace us all is the gentle strength of God: “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ” (Romans 8:39).

In the Hebrew Scriptures we are reminded on a number of occasions that, “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord”. And alongside this, we see many, many declarations of God’s mercy and forgiveness, and the call to turn to this God of mercy, to be a light to others. We see, in these words, that in the very early development of moral consciousness, humankind came to understand that revenge is not fitting, it is not to be part of our dealings with one another. Even the teaching, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, was not so much condoning revenge as limiting its extent, curbing unfettered and disproportionate violence and payback. And in the story of the cross we see a powerful expression of a non-violent response. We also see the *apparent* powerlessness of such a non-violent response. Violence has immediate results. The gentle strength of God, indeed the power of God, manifests at a different pace. It asks for patience, courage and trust. Violence will not have the last word. It asks us to move from the logic of winners and losers to an embrace of a deeper truth about us. “Our identity rests in God’s relentless tenderness for us revealed in Jesus Christ”, says Brennan Manning in *Abba’s Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*. And we are asked to mirror that relentless tenderness in our world.

We need intimacy in our world today. It is the healing and soothing balm we need in our world, in our relationships and interactions, in our political and all other decisions. We need it to soothe our own spirits. We have the means to achieve this. Each evening, in our own lounge-room, we look into the faces of those who are suffering, caught in conflict, suffering violence and brutality. It is not easy to turn away, and we should thank God for that. Real intimacy will be our salvation for it will elicit a gentle response: “Do to others as you would like them to do to you” (Matthew 7:12).

In his book, *A Canopy of Stars*, Chris Gleeson SJ, tells this story: “In July 1992, there appeared in The New York Times Magazine, a photo of a musician named Vedran Smailovic. He was a cellist in the war-torn country of Bosnia, and every day he used to come to the centre of the town and play his cello. It was a time of violent civil war in the city, with everyone becoming an enemy of someone else. Except for this one man, who came to the street corner every day to play his cello. There he was in the photo – middle-aged, longish hair, great bushy moustache, dressed in formal evening clothes – sitting in a fire-charred chair in the middle of a street, where mortar fire had struck a headline just the previous day killing 22 people. A member of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra, he was doing what he loved and knew best – he was playing his cello. He thought there was little he could do about hate or war as a musician. So every day for 22 days, knowing he might be shot or beaten, he braved sniper and artillery fire to play the most beautiful music he knew – Albinoni’s Adagio in G Minor – a piece of music constructed from manuscript fragments found in the ruins of the fire-bombed city of Dresden after World War II. To me this photo of the cellist is a picture of great hope, of God’s goodness. His music was stronger than hate, his courage stronger than fear. In time other musicians came to join him in the street and play their music. Their courage was contagious and eventually the fighting stopped”.

There was power and strength in this gentle beauty, and slowly it drew others in. No compulsion, no orders, no obvious signs of power. It was ‘resurrection’. The goodness and beauty within the man brought transformation. Like Father Jorge offering the bread on the altar of rubble, he offered his music in the war-torn street. He offered it as a gift to a suffering world and it healed. This is where we are all invited to go. What can I pour out into the brutality of our day? Words and gestures of gentleness,

however small, will be the powerful healing balm so needed. Last night I watched the long row of hearses carrying the bodies of the passengers of Flight MH17 slowly making its way through the streets of Eindhoven, and as the procession passed by, people lining the streets, standing in reverent silence, threw flowers onto the cars. What a powerful and moving expression of the refusal of violence. In this tender gesture the sacramentality of life was affirmed. And this is the only response to violence we can legitimately have.

You will shine in the world like bright stars because you are offering it the word of life Philippians 2:15

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