



Beyond Fear into Love: Listening again to the events of our live

If we were to ask ourselves what personal characteristics we would most value about ourselves, I doubt that many of us would answer 'dependency'. We live in a culture that prizes anything but dependency. Independence, autonomy, self-reliance are the things that we aspire to for ourselves and that we like to see in other people. Further, in recent times we have coined a whole range of phrases and words that make us even more suspicious of the experience of dependency: we speak of 'dependent relationships', of people acting simply out of their dependencies and we speak of the phenomenon of 'co-dependency' and all its variations.

In short dependency does not have much sale value in our Western world!

Yet, in the way that Jesus teaches us to pray and in his consideration of the graciousness of his Father towards us, Jesus invites us constantly to live out of a radical dependency with him on his Father. This invitation is at the very heart of the 'Lord's Prayer' which, every time we say it, turns our attention to the acknowledgement that we are not self-sufficient in either our material or spiritual needs. Despite our efforts to project the opposite, we are not made self-sufficient.

Jesus invites us to live out of a radical dependency with him on his Father. What might this mean for us? Clearly, this does not mean an abdication of our own creativity, initiative or responsibility. The dependency the gospel is indicating does not mean that we should forego 'knocking, asking, searching.' Dependency in the gospel does not mean passivity.

Quite the opposite! I think the gospel's sense of dependency equates to a kind of trust. We are to live our lives with trust. What is this trust about?

It is to believe at heart that God is for us, that God works for our good, and that God is working through the events of our own life to bring about his purposes for us. This belief does not mean that we will not have difficulties, that we will not make mistakes or that seemingly bad things won't happen to us. This belief does not make us immune from life's unpredictability and vicissitudes.

What, I believe, it does mean, rather, is that we are enabled to enter into all that does happen to us - good and bad - with critical discernment. It means we are given the space to always ask, "What is the lesson, what is the invitation, what is the possibility contained in anything that occurs in our life?"

In the 17th century there was a famous French spiritual writer, Jean Pierre de Caussade. He wrote these words,

Faith sees the work of divine action in everything. It sees that Jesus Christ lives in all things, extending his influence over the centuries

so that the briefest moment and the tiniest atom contain a portion of that hidden life and its mysterious work. Jesus Christ, after his resurrection, surprised the disciples when he appeared before them in disguise . . . the same Jesus still lives and works among us, still surprises . . . there is no moment when God is not manifest . . . Everything that happens to us, in us, and through us, embraces and conceals God's divine but veiled purpose . . . If we could pierce that veil and if we were vigilant and attentive, God would unceasingly reveal himself to us and we would rejoice in his works, and in all that happens to us we would say to everything, "It is the Lord."¹

De Caussade is not advocating that we passively accept all that happens to us naively as the will of God. Clearly bad things happen to us in our life and this is not the will of God. What he is suggesting, however, is that even in the bad things that happen to us, we can still look for an invitation, a new possibility. This is what it means to live our life out of a sense of faith and trust.

De Caussade connects this spiritual wakefulness to what he terms the 'sacrament of the present moment.' Each moment contains the fullness of God and his will. To live in this way is the goal of Christian responsibility. De Caussade goes on to say that we would tend to treat a king in disguise very differently once we recognised him that from when we first saw him as only the figure of an ordinary man. Similarly, when we can recognise God in the most ordinary of the events of our life, then we tend to treat the whole of life with a sense of delight and rejoicing. The heart, he says, "worships the royal majesty in whatever form it appears and the more humble the disguise, the more the heart is pierced through with love." It is one thing, he teaches, for us to adore Jesus at the Transfiguration, to love God in great things, but it is more perfect an act of faith to worship him in small ones. This ability to discover God in the smallest and most ordinary things as well as the greatest is to possess a rare and sublime faith.²

God speaks to us each one individually in what happens to us from one moment to the next. No moment therefore is trivial for the one who believes. De Caussade offers us the example of Mary and Joseph:

Outwardly, Mary's life is represented as simple and ordinary. She does and suffers what others in her situation do and suffer; she visits her cousin Elizabeth as other relations do; she goes to Bethlehem for the census as others do; she lodges in a stable in consequence of her poverty, she returns to Nazareth having been forced to leave on account of Herod's persecution. She lives quietly with Jesus and Joseph who work for their living. Such is the daily bread of the Holy Family. But by what bread do Mary and Joseph nourish their faith? How is what happens moment by moment a sacrament for them? What do they discern beneath the seemingly everyday events which occupy them? What is seen is similar to what happens to the rest of mankind. But what is unseen, that which faith discerns and unravels, is nothing less than God fulfilling his mighty purposes.

¹ Jean Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* (London: Collins Fount, 1981), 106.

² Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, 83-85.

O bread of angels . . . sacrament of the present moment, you bring God to the mean surroundings of a lowly stable in a manger among straw and hay. But to whom do you give yourself? God reveals himself to the humble in small things -He has filled the hungry with good things - but the proud, who only attach importance to outward appearances, cannot see him even in big ones³

God acts in our life. He is working through the events of our own life to bring about his purposes for us. As Jeremiah writes prophetically,

Yes, I know what plans I have in mind for you . . . plans for peace, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. When you call to me and come and pray to me I shall listen to you. When you search for me, you will find me; when you search wholeheartedly for me, I shall let you find me . . . I shall bring you back to the place from which I exiled you. (Jer. 29:11-14)

Can we listen to the story of our life with this faith and with this confidence? Can we enter into the events of our life, always wondering how this or that particular event might be the action of God fulfilling his promise to us? This deep attentiveness to the events our life, which is termed trusting in Providence, leads us into the same kind of dependency that Jesus had with the Father. In that relationship Jesus has complete trust. "If you know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?"

Then he said to his disciples, "That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it . . . think of the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have no storehouses and no barns; yet God feeds them. And how much more you are worth than the birds! Can any of you, however much you worry, add a single cubit to your span of life?

Now if that is how God clothes a flower which is growing wild today and is thrown into the furnace tomorrow, how much more will he look after you . . . There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom. (Lk 12:22-32)

In this relationship Jesus has complete trust. It is the opposite of living in fear and in self-sufficiency, if you like the two mortal sins in the gospel. It is the isolation of self-sufficiency and fear which paralyze us and stunt us. It is always fear which stops us loving in the way that we would most deeply want. And nothing works to fragment us as much as isolation. That is why Jesus says to us time and time again, "Do not be afraid!" In other words trust and therefore be free to love.

Living in the dependency born of trust is a commitment to be listeners for the God of love and of life, the God who desires our good. Do we dare to trust in the way that Jesus invites us? Do we dare to allow ourselves to be caught up in the same relationship he has with his Father? Do we dare to utter the name of "Father" deep in our hearts in response to all the events of our life?

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³ Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, 18.

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