

Your true greatness

I will never forget the first time I held a newborn baby in my hands in hospital. Nothing prepares you for that moment. Beforehand you might be tempted to think “big deal”. But when you stand there holding that tiny new life in your hands (not even your arms) – it is amazing! The sense of awe at the miracle, the preciousness of life, each tiny one unique, each one a whole world. So small, and yet it’s all there, so much potential already there within, waiting to unfold gradually over a lifetime (like the acorn and the tree). It’s amazing – you can’t help but marvel at the wonder and mystery of human life. Just think how much there still is in all of us waiting to emerge if we let it.

Life is a wonderful vocation, a call, a journey – of discovering all the potential that lies waiting for us to discover it and to allow it to emerge. That choice is ours and ours alone. God has done everything up to the point of our birth – from then on, because of his total respect for our freedom, he needs our consent, our “yes” at every step of the journey. He will inspire, hint, open our eyes, but only we can choose to see and to say like Mary: “Yes, let it be done in me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38). It is up to us to have the courage to choose truth, to choose to be who we sense we most truly are, behind all the evasions, illusions, compromises, fears and uncertainties of our lives.

This makes life into a journey of discovery, an adventure... What is your true greatness? He has written it deep in your own heart – listen, look to your own experience. There is something waiting to come to be within you. If you listen, you can sense it. It is your unique voice that has its place in the symphony of creation. Without it that symphony is poorer, diminished. It is waiting for your “yes”.

There is a beautiful poem by Denise Levertov called Annunciation. In it she describes the moment when Mary's destiny is revealed to her – and God, together with all creation, *waits*, poised, for her answer. She must choose freely. The poem says;

“... we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage
The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent. *God waited.*

She was free
to accept or refuse, choice
integral to humanness.”

God's waits for *your* “yes”, a yes that needs to be spoken again and again as your life unfolds and reveals itself to you.

St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians has a wonderful image - where when each of us says our own “yes” to God's call within us, somehow we find the place that is exactly right for us in life, and all of us, each making our own unique contribution, come together to create something wonderful, what he calls a “place where God lives”.

(Ephesians 4:12)

I would like to share some images, some examples of people who have said yes. Not so much people with amazing talents like concert pianists or astrophysicists, but “ordinary” people who because of the fullness of their “yes” to life, are also extraordinary - like all of us are *really*.

The first is a monk called Christian de Chergé, who was the prior of the Trappist monastery of Tibhirine in Algeria. The story of that community was the subject of a beautiful film called: “Of Gods and

Men.” It is a time of great political unrest in the country and the community are warned to leave because their lives are in danger. If they stay they will almost certainly die. The Prior calls a community meeting, at which he suggests that, despite the danger, they stay, because they belong with these people they have come to know and love and who love them. Many of the community are frightened – they know what saying yes will mean. After the meeting they all, each one, hesitatingly and fearfully, make their own personal private heroic journey to saying “yes”. At the next meeting, when the Prior asks for their decision, each one of them in turn says: “Yes, I will stay.” And all but two are indeed killed. At one point, the prior, Fr Christian, knowing he will die, writes a letter of thanksgiving to God for his life. In it he looks to the time of his death and he addresses the man who will kill him. He says this:

“I would like, when the time comes, to have a space of clearness that would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who will strike me down.

I give thanks to God for all that has happened, and will happen, in my life. In this “thank you,” which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you, my last-minute friend who will not have known what you are doing...I commend you to the God in whose face I see yours. And may we find each other, happy ‘good thieves’ in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both.”

What amazing peace, generosity, acceptance and freedom. Born of his saying yes to God in his life.

Another example: I had the privilege of reading a letter a man wrote in memory of his grandmother. She had lived to a ripe old age and was the centre of a large family covering four generations. He says

this in his thank you to her.

“You have watched us grow and have known how to listen. You were the still point around which we have built our lives. You have always received us generously ... and with your wisdom you have been for us a secure point of reference in life even from a distance

You have taught us all what is right, what is good, you have taught us to have a taste for beauty and to have the courage of our own freedom.

You have shown us the beauty of life, even in the midst of misfortune.

You have shown us that peace comes from accepting our own limitations as human beings and from offering the guidance of our lives to someone greater, to God.”

Sometimes we give far more than we know...

Finally, an example much closer to home for me, a person who shared some of my time in seminary with me, many years ago. He left after about six months to go instead to work for a charity.

But spending time with him during those six months taught me a lot. There was about him solidity, a sense of being rooted in something, being nourished by something that really gave him life. There was a peace, a completeness and joy about him that people could sense. And he gave! That was like his *default setting*. He focused on *other people* – he would be the one to give the encouraging word, to make the thoughtful gesture, who would notice if someone was a bit down and would go over and laugh and chat with them. You could see the effects of his presence rippling out through the people around him.

I think I learned from him my “proper size” as a person, what it means to be really fully human, what the human vocation is really about. And once you have sensed that it’s hard to fool yourself when you ignore it!

What is your proper size? In a way we all know it deep down. What would it be like if your true self were to emerge, the self God created you to be? What would it be like if your true capacity for goodness were liberated, if you consented bit by bit to allow that to happen, for *your* light to shine through your broken self just like light shines through stained glass windows, each with its own unique colour and beauty.

“Submit,” says St Paul “to the word that has been planted within you.” If you do, he promises, your true face will be unveiled and you will, in your unique way, reflect something of the brightness on the face of Christ, (2 Cor 3:18)

So this is the challenge, the same for all of us – to grow to our own full size, to become the fully mature human being we were created to become. To let go of compromise, of meanness of spirit, of grudges, selfishness. To choose integrity, to choose all that is good and right. To have the courage to live what is best within us, to become who we sense we can be. St Paul tells us that all creation is waiting for this, is waiting eagerly for the children of God to be revealed and for their true light to shine through. (*Romans 8:14-19*).

When I give retreats to school children, I often ask them who inspires them. They usually start with the obvious television stars of various kinds, but very quickly they get serious – “It’s my mother, my father, the girl down the road who is sick but always peaceful, the guy in my class who is always standing up for the underdog, the person I know who is always doing things for other people...”

Remember that the most powerful gifts are not “out there” somewhere – they are very close, already here, waiting for us, written within our own very humanity. Yes, there are “special” gifts but, as St Paul says in *1 Cor 13*, “there are higher gifts to be ambitious about, and of those only three last; “faith, hope and love, and the greatest of them is love.”

What the writer Annie Dillard says about writing applies to all of us as we write the story of our lives.

“One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better.”

(Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*.)

So, don't hold back. Don't be afraid. Give of your best to life now and all the good that God has made you capable of will come alive.

Some suggestions for today

1. Who are the people whose lives have enriched you? Remember them. What is it about them that you so appreciate? What do/did they give you?
2. Who are the people you know who inspire you now? What is it about them? Maybe you might like to say something to them?
3. Who are the people whose lives you impact upon? What can you give to them? What are the gifts you can share with them?

4. Read through Levertov's poem. Truly living is always a risk. How must it have been for Mary? What is God asking of you? He waits for your choice.
5. Read through 1 Cor 13 which speaks of the most important gifts of all. How would you live them?
6. Take some time to thank God for the wonder and mystery of your being. Go out into nature and look around. If you are able to look at the stars and remember the words of the psalm: "When I see the heavens the work of your hands, the moon and the stars that you have made, who am I that you are mindful of me. And yet you have made me little less than a god." (Psalm 8:3-6)

TEXTS FOR REFLECTION

1 Cor 13: The greatest gift

If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing.

If I have the gift of prophecy, understanding all the mysteries there are, and knowing everything, and if I have faith in all its fulness, to move mountains, but without love, then I am nothing at all.

If I give away all that I possess, piece by piece, and if I even let them take my body to burn it, but am without love, it will do me no good whatever.

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited;

it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful.

Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.

Love does not come to an end. But if there are gifts of prophecy, the time will come when they must fail; or the gift of languages, it will not continue for ever; and knowledge - for this, too, the time will come when it must fail.

For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesying is imperfect; but once perfection comes, all imperfect things will disappear.

When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and think like a child, and argue like a child, but now I am a man, all childish ways are put behind me.

Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face. The knowledge that I have now is imperfect; but then I shall know as fully as I am known.

In short, there are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love.

Annunciation by Denise Levertov

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage
The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent. God waited.

She was free
to accept or refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations

of one sort or another in most lives?
Some unwillingly undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.

More often those moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes..

She had been a child who played, ate, spelt
like any other child - but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
only asked

a simple, "How can this be?"
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
perceiving instantly
the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
in hidden, finite inwardness,

nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power -
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.

Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love -

but who was God.
(Denise Levertov)

Patience by Rainer Maria Rilke

I want to beg you to be patient
towards all that is unsolved in your heart.
Do not now seek the answers that cannot be given you
because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it,
live along some distant day
into the answer.
(Rilke: Letters to a young Poet)