

Life and Death (or Death and Life!)



I'll begin with an admission: November is not my favourite month. Apart from the obvious natural signs of decay surrounding us, and the often inclement weather, it is the season of remembrance, and the mood is sombre. For me, this is compounded by the fact that the anniversary of my father's death falls on Remembrance Sunday. He died in less than ideal circumstances, and remembering those circumstances is painful. The sombre mood can be hard to shake off, perhaps even more so for those self-isolating during the Covid crisis, surrounded by memories and bereft of the comfort of face to face contact.

I came across a brilliant word the other day – ACEDIA. Full marks to you if you have heard of it! It has been buried in the annals of history for hundreds of years, but it deserves an airing. With the advent of Lockdown 2, it perfectly describes a state of mind many of us are experiencing. It was used to describe the feelings and emotions of people whose lives were constrained within a solitary existence – for example - a monastic life. The conflicting emotions endemic to this were part of the paradox of being where you were called to be, but, possibly, struggling with the implications of the required social and spiritual isolation.

Apparently, John Cassian, a 5th century monk and theologian, wrote about an emotion experienced by the Ancient Greeks whereby the mind is attacked by a “bodily listlessness and yawning hunger as though (one is) worn by a long journey or prolonged fast”. This is coupled with an inability to concentrate, a strange combination of listlessness, undirected anxiousness and general state of apathy. The monks associated it with a *spiritual* onslaught and called this train of thought “the noonday demon”. Over the ensuing years this complex set of emotions subsequently labelled ACEDIA, metamorphosed into ‘sloth’ – a term much more familiar to us – nowadays used in a negative and rather one-dimensional way. Indeed, it is listed as one of the Seven Deadly Sins!

In our present context, I suggest we resurrect the word ACEDIA, but with the caveat of using it in a positive, accepting way – ie without attaching the element of ‘guilt’ that its original context implied. I’m not a lover of ‘labels’, but in this instance, I think it’s useful to adopt this nuanced word, which describes so aptly all these vague, disquieting emotions that are bubbling within us.

At this juncture it’s worth pointing out that, in contrast to the elective monastic existence of the aforementioned monks, our current situation has been imposed on us, and we have to find ways of acknowledging the conflicting emotions/moods many of us are experiencing, and find a way to harness our energy in a life-affirming way in order to actively flourish within our confinement. We can *choose* to flourish. As Dawn LaValle Norman wisely said of her elected monastic experience, “ *when you can’t change your environment, you have to change yourself.....Restrictions can promote transformation through friction.....When we can’t escape, we have a tremendous opportunity for change*”.*

I received a booklet from Tearfund this week which offers an approach to transitioning from a ‘life-sapping’ situation to a ‘life-enhancing’ one:

*“First, stop and pray. Ask God to help you identify the issues that are holding you back or the challenge that he would like you to takeGod often provides all we need in each circumstance every day to overcome the problems/challenges we face. So pray and ask what you have in your house, or what skills and abilities you have that could help overcome your challenges.”***

This is an opportune time to ‘put our house in order’, spiritually, physically and emotionally (as far as we are able), to prepare ourselves for LAC (Life After Covid) with its inevitable changed landscape. God has offered us a life-line in the form of his beloved Son. Can he use us as a life-line to others? If so, how?

Romans 6: 11-14

**Article: What Groundhog Day (and my time in a monastery) taught me about Lockdown. Dawn LaValle Norman*

***Tearfund booklet: Facing Life’s Challenges*

11.11.20.