

“ALL WILL BE WELL”

As we return to Mass being celebrated once again in our churches we are faced with new challenges to how we go about celebrating these sacred mysteries. It certainly will not be like it was. The coronavirus pandemic has taught us that there are some things in life which we have no control. We discover in the course of our lives that reality refuses to bow to our commands. We are forced to let go when we want so much to hold on, and to hold on when we want so much to let go. We find that our lives – all our lives – include unexpected twists, unwanted endings, and challenges of every puzzling kind.

Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Protestant theologian composed a prayer in 1943 that has become the cornerstone of the recovery movement: “God, grant me the serenity accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This is a beautiful and powerful prayer. The things we cannot change will be different for each of us, though there seems to be a common thread that runs through our lives that are unavoidable:

- 1 Everything changes and ends
- 2 Things do not always go according to plan
- 3 Life is not always fair
- 4 Pain is part of life
- 5 People are not loving and loyal all the time

These seem to be the core challenges that we all face to some degree and yet it seems that we often behave as if they don't apply to us. When we ignore these basic truths we resist reality, and life becomes an endless series of disappointments, frustrations and sorrows. It is only when we embrace these fundamental truths that we come to realise that they are exactly what we need to gain courage, compassion and wisdom. This will lead us ultimately to a sense of peace and happiness. These five basic truths are things that we cannot change, as they are built into the very nature of things. Of course there are equally many delightful truths too: we experience bliss, sometimes our hopes are exceeded, we discover unique inner gifts, things have a way of working out for good and the miracle of inner healing that happens so undeservedly.

Life happens to us in its own way, no matter how much we may protest or seek to dodge it. No one is or has ever been exempt from these five basic truths. If we cannot tolerate them, we add stress to our lives by fighting a losing battle. As my friend Michelle, who died of breast cancer at the age of 38 years, once told me, “If you fight against reality, you will lose”, and then she would wryly add, “but only always”!

We need not feel despair when facing reality and we can learn to accept life on its own terms. We do not need to shake a fist at God or demand an exemption when things do not work out as we planned. We can craft a wise and authentic way of living by saying yes to life as it is. I love the Chinese story of an old farmer who had an old horse for tilling his fields. One day the horse escaped into the hills and when all the farmer's neighbours sympathised with the old man over his bad luck, the farmer replied. “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?” A week later the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbours congratulated the farmer on his good luck. His reply was, “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?” Then when the farmer's son was attempting to tame one of the wild horses he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone thought this very bad luck. Not the farmer, whose only reaction was, “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows? Some weeks later the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth

they found there. When they saw the farmer's son with his broken leg they let him off. Now was that good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?

Everything that seems on the surface to be an evil may be a good in disguise. And everything that seems good on the surface may really be an evil. So we are wise when we leave it to God to decide what is good luck and what is bad luck, and thank him for all things turn out for good with those who love him. Then we shall see something of that marvellous mystical vision of Juliana of Norwich who uttered what for me is the loveliest and most consoling sentence I have ever read (and Father Brian would agree with me): "And all things will be well; and all things will be well; and all manner of things will be well."

The story of the Buddha and his path to enlightenment also shows us how the five basic truths are the foundation for growth and transformation. The Buddha was born Siddhartha Gautama, an Indian prince. His father tried to protect him from encountering pain and displeasure. The king tried to create a life of sheer perfection for Siddhartha, providing him with every possible satisfaction and shielding him from every distress and disappointment. But one day the young prince wanted to see what lay beyond the palace walls. When he ventured out he soon encountered sickness, old age, and death – the natural conditions of everyday life – for the first time! These sights moved him deeply and set him on a spiritual path that ultimately led him to enlightenment. His legendary transformation began by facing the natural laws of life with deep curiosity and audacious courage.

Like the Buddha and Christ, we need to ask ourselves are we here on earth to get our way or to dance with the flow of life? Are we here to make sure everything goes according to our plans or to trust the surprises and synchronicities that lead us to seeing life in a new way? Are we here to make sure we get a fair deal or to live upright and loving lives. Are we here to avoid pain or to deal with it, grow from it, and learn to be compassionate. This is what Jesus meant in the Sermon on the Mount, when he says: "Blessed are those who mourn", as those who have lost a loved one to the coronavirus pandemic – they shall be comforted. And "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right", as those who have protested for justice in the Black Lives Matter movement – they shall be satisfied. And "Blessed are the pure in heart", as those who can see what is positive in these long days of lockdown as well as the goodness in their neighbours and becoming appreciative of the things they took so much for granted – they shall see God. Jesus said " I have come so that you may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). The Buddha tells us that in the human realm there is just the right mix of suffering and joy for us to awaken, to become enlightened. Jesus and Buddha would get along nicely together.

PS Talking about Buddha, did you hear about a Buddhist student, who asks his master how long will it take to gain enlightenment if he practised diligently? The master says, "ten years". "Well", says the student, "How about if I really work and double my effort?" "Twenty years."

Once upon a time, plastic surgery was frowned up. Now you mention you might get Botox and nobody raises an eyebrow.

A police recruit was asked during an exam, "What would you do if you had to arrest your own mother"? He said, "Call for back up".