

A Stumbling Block or a Stepping Stone?

Isn't it strange how princes and kings,
and clowns that caper in sawdust rings,
and common people, like you and me,
are builders for eternity?

Each is given a list of rules;
a shapeless mass; a bag of tools.
And each must fashion, ere life is flown,
A stumbling block, or a Stepping-Stone.¹

Hours from now we will once more say goodbye to the year we have been journeying through and with the usual public fanfare and fireworks we will herald in the New Year. As yet unknown, untested, untried, what I wonder is ahead for us as a Christian community of faith, for us as individuals as well as in community with our families, friends and countless others who share this earthly home with us?

The poem by Robert Sharpe which I just read to you serves as a reminder that whether we are rulers or ragamuffins, young or old we have the potential and power within each of us to build and play our part in shaping our world into a better place. As Christians we are called to be Christ's earthly builders, not simply to engage in a one off project or a short term event, which we excitedly report on in our latest newsletter, but rather a sacrificial lifelong commitment to the God we profess to worship. We are called for the long haul, not a short overnight stop over.

¹ R. L. Sharpe

The second verse of the poem emphasises the strengths we each bring to such a mammoth task, our bag of tools, being our unique characters and our many gifts and abilities. Furthermore we have the book of rules, the Bible, to shine light on the way ahead. All this though comes with a warning and a challenge as the poem finishes with the phrase,

‘And each must fashion, ere life is flown, a stumbling block, or a Stepping-Stone.’

There is a delightful story about a little boy who was leading his sister up a mountain path. The way was not at all easy. Becoming exhausted and frustrated by the arduous journey the little girl finally turned to her brother and said, "Why, this isn't a path at all! It's too rocky and bumpy!" To which her brother replied, "Sis, the bumps are what you climb on!"

No-one is free from life's bumps. There will be times when, like the little girl, we simply want to give in and give up, yet using the words in an old country song, 'I never promised you a rose garden', being a follower of Christ certainly doesn't mean the magic removal of those stumbling blocks. But rather with Christ by our side we are given the spiritual strength and understanding to turn those over and use them as stepping stones to take us striding into the upcoming year come what may, with the catchcry, 'coming, ready or not!'

Simeon whom we have heard about again today alluded to the stumbling blocks and stepping stones which were ahead for the newborn Christ. How Jesus' parents felt being confronted by the elderly couple, Simeon and Anna, as they fulfilled their obligations as Jewish parents in presenting their baby to the Temple, we do not know. We can though imagine how startled they may have been.

Simeon's opening words, coming so quickly after the wonder and excitement of the build up to Christ's birth, filled with carols, manger scenes and Christmas trees surrounded by presents seem so out of place.

For Simeon begins by speaking of his own impending death. He had, he said, been waiting to see this sign of God's promise of salvation for the people of Israel and the wider world made real through his sending of his son to earth. Now, having seen Jesus with his own eyes he was fully at peace and ready to depart this earthly life.

After praising God for the light Jesus would bring to all people he continued by blessing the new parents, but then came the first sign of the stumbling blocks which lay ahead for the young Christ. Simeon tells them that their baby would be responsible for the rise and fall of many and that he would be opposed. If that wasn't enough to take in he went on to tell Mary that a sword would pierce her heart as well.

This gospel reading taken from Luke gives us a glimpse into Jesus' life following his birth. Little is written or known of those early years and this account of the family's visit to the temple is a reminder that there is far more to Christ's birth than the actual event. Indeed the words of both Simeon and Anna foretold the purpose of Jesus coming into our world as one of us that takes us far beyond the manger scenes that have dominated the build up to Christmas Day.

It's worth noting too that Jesus is welcomed into the temple not by the High Priest, nor by any of the clergy or a person of power and prestige, but rather by two elderly people, a man and a woman, whose only qualifications for spiritual weight was that were they both devout and elderly!

From the very beginning Jesus himself lived among the economic margins of his own community, a poor family raising a child destined to change the world. Through a baby's birth God intruded into our world in a whole new radical way in the person of Jesus. Jesus was not at all like those who came before him.

St Paul would go on to call him *'the visible image of our invisible God'*!

Here in the Temple scene we get the first glimpse through Anna and Simeon of how the visible image may play out in the streets and cities among diverse communities of women and men where Jesus would minister.

How fitting therefore to have such a glimpse brought to us by two very ordinary people. Here we are given a well-timed reminder that Luke made room for a variety of bodies and proximities to the gospel message of inclusiveness and love for all people regardless of their status; the young and not so young, those who were desperately poor and those seen as outsiders and undesirables.

Remember it was Jesus who gave us a new commandment, "That we love one another as he has loves us". Christ's earthly ministry, as he walked the streets among the people, exemplified immense compassion coupled with great kindness and concern for all. Christ's practical ministry of unconditional care lit the pathway for us to carry on that sharing of love with others, thereby enabling us to become stepping-stones into a new world of radical justice, mercy, hope, and peace.

Mother Teresa once said, "The reason we have not peace is that we have forgotten that we belong to one another."

'In Christ there is no East or West, in him no north or South but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth'.

Stumbling blocks of racial divide, of westernised superiority, of the distancing caused by an 'us and them' attitude all have within it the possibility of being a life giving stepping-stone. But for that to happen we have to turn it over and turn it around, allowing God's love, through the earthly examples modelled for us by Christ, guide and strengthen us.

For instance,

- ✓ The hearsay we at times love to repeat: Turned over becomes a prayer for a person's circumstance, offering afresh the opportunity to see from a different perspective, to try and step across the road for others.
- ✓ The bitterness we can hold: Turned over becomes compassion and forgiveness.
- ✓ The self-justification and arrogant pride we can sometimes foster: Turned over becomes humility and thankfulness for all the wonderful opportunities and gifts God so freely gives us.
- ✓ The irritation and annoyance with others, which threatens our peace of mind on occasions: Turned over becomes persistence and care and a real willingness to listen and to walk a mile in another's shoes

In concluding, each day we wake up and get up we face a new day. We may think we have that day planned however as we all know we can be suddenly hit by the unexpected, when the situation you face seems too hard to handle, its then we need to draw on our bag of tools, our inner resources, alongside our faith and the travelling companions God has given us as we journey through life. As followers of Christ, like Jesus we are called into the arena of life to play our part and do our bit.

Theodore Roosevelt once gave a speech titled, ' *the man in the arena*' and I finish now by paraphrasing a short section of that memorable speech.

It is not the critic who counts; not the one who points out how the strong person stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the one who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if they fail, at least fail while daring greatly, so that their place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Amen

Chris Frazer

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