

## How hard it is to ...

About three or four times a week, in the late afternoon when sun is not so hot, I take an hour's walk on the beach. The part of the beach where I walk is away a little from the tourist areas and so is fairly quiet and it also has a pleasant café where I can have a cup of tea or a cold drink after the walk. This part of the beach, however, is also frequented by beach boys offering "massage" and although these boys now know that I am not a customer, they seem to enjoy it when I stop and chat with them and in this way I have got to know some of their names and little bits of their stories. On several occasions, while chatting with them, I have realised that they were hungry and so I have given them a little money for a meal, but this has led to one or two coming back again to ask for more – and this is true of one boy in particular. Now, when I see him, my heart sinks, for I know that he will come over and ask for money and I have not found a good way of handling this. I usually just turn and say, "No", but that always leaves me feeling uncomfortable for the thought arises, "What if this time he really is hungry and needs food?" I am in a quandary – if I give something I feel I am being taken advantage of and if I do not give I feel that I may be failing someone in need. Giving charity is not easy!

This is not a new problem. One of our earliest catechetical documents, the *Didache*, written about the year AD150, teaches that God gives us our possessions so that we can share what we have with the poor, but it adds, "*however, let your alms sweat in your hands, until you decide whom to give to*". Even back then they had trouble with this and there is still no easy answer.

One of my friends, who reads this blog, wrote to tell me of the trouble she has when confronted with the many beggars in the place where she now lives. She writes that the sight of them pulls at her heart strings and she has tried various ways to help them – even trying to find work for some of them – but it has become clear, she says, that they do not want a hand-up, they want a hand-out! After such disappointments, there is a great temptation to give oneself a rule: "I will not give money to beggars". However, while such a rule might help salve our consciences, it does not solve the problem that maybe the person now before me really does need help. So, we are back again with the problem, "How do I know?"

In our day to day living, we have to lay down rules to help us handle the various situations we meet, for to have to decide from first principles every moral situation we come up against would demand a tremendous outlay of psychic and spiritual energy and would leave very little for the ordinary everyday loving and caring, which make up the heart of human living. However, even though we give ourselves rules, we need to appreciate that these rules can only be guidelines for action; they cannot be adequate solutions for every situation we come up against – but there is a great temptation to try to make them so. If we do this, if we are unwilling to bend and insist on following those rules in all situations, then one day those rules will kill – kill those they are supposed to help and also kill the moral integrity of those who apply them in this way. All rules and laws – be they from Scripture, from our teachers or ones we make for ourselves – are there help us make a more balanced judgement in the face of a new situation, but are not there to replace that moral judgement. However, we also need to know that even if we do use these rules as guidelines rather than as infallible codes of conduct they will not shield us from error. To live integrally is to live fallibly and although this is uncomfortable, it is the way Christ calls us to live.

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Christ's temptation in the desert can be seen as underlining this point. The story of the temptations is preceded by Jesus' baptism at the Jordan and this is the context within which the temptation accounts should be looked at. At the Jordan, Jesus was revealed as Messiah; he embraced the wonder and the limitations of being human, but was then faced with the human question of how to live out that mission as Messiah - there was no ready-made path to follow; he had to struggle, like us, to discover how to walk with God. Was he going to lay down a plan and follow this through? If so, what type of plan? It was this question that the temptations were addressing – what type of Messiah should he be?

- Should he feed the poor; give them the help they needed and in this way lead them into salvation? He answered, "No", for he saw we need more than bread by which to live – but, there were times when he did feed the hungry, showing that while he rejected an absolute rule, he nevertheless accepted the insight.
- Should he instead take up political power and use it to establish a just society? Justice must be part of the Kingdom, but he also saw that subjecting everyone to the same rules and regulations would, eventually, crush some. So, this also was rejected, but when the young man came asking how to inherit eternal life and said, "You know the commandments, follow them". In other words, no blanket laws, but rules and regulations have a major place in our lives.
- Lastly came the temptation to use miraculous power to awe the people into following him, but he wanted the hearts of people not their fear and so he also rejected this way, but that did not stop him, on occasions, from using miracles to show God's love for someone.

What Christ did was choose was to walk fallibly; to walk uncertainly; to walk humanly, in daily reliance on the Lord. He chose to walk in trust – believing that his Father would guide him and that even if he got it wrong, the Father would bring it right in the end. It is a basic truth, which most of us miss, that the struggle to do the right thing is more important than actually being able to do it, for it is in this struggle that we let God into our humanity, that our humanity thus finds its glory by being in partnership with God. This is the New Covenant. However, living with such uncertainty hurts and we see that hurt coming out for the Lord on the night before he died, "Father let this cup pass from me" Is there not another way to do this? He had to choose what he thought the Father wanted – but in faith and not in certainty. And that hurts.

Our giving of charity is the same. If we wish to walk with God we have to share what we have, but if we lay down hard and fast rules of how to do this, we may find a certain type of peace for ourselves, but people will get hurt. Rules are made for people not people for the rules. Rules give us insight into situations, but not solutions – at least not human solutions. To walk with God means walking in uncertainty, only rarely knowing whether I am actually doing the right thing, but I will only be able to do this if I know that I am loved by God – not loved because I do right things, but loved because I am. Such a way of living/loving means that I will often have to agonise over whether what I am doing in a particular situation is right, but I will dare to do it, not because I know it to be right, but because I know that I am loved - and that even if I get it wrong the one who loves me will turn it to the good.

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So when I return to Bali and my walks on the beach and I see that boy coming towards me, I am going to have to resist just saying to him "No!" I am going to have to stop and talk. I will not enjoy the turmoil of having to decide each time whether he truly is hungry or whether he just wants an easy hand-out, but that is the price I have to pay for walking with my Lord, for only in my uncertainty, my unknowing, can Jesus find his place as my companion.

### **Diary**

I am enjoying my visit to UK and meeting so many old friends. However, I am having to ration my time and rather than having a meal with them, which I would like, I am having to limit myself to having a cup of tea and a chat.

I have a friend from Indonesia with me and I wanted him to see more of the country than just SE England, so we visited North East Scotland for a jazz festival – I have never seen that part of Scotland before. It was lovely and the jazz was great – and my friend saw his first snow and his first snowball fight! He loved it.

I am staying with my ex-housekeeper Josie, who has given me a bed sit in her house to use when I am in England. I am so grateful to her. She has been kindness itself. It is very humbling to see the goodness and love of people.

I have now renewed my visa and so I leave for Bali again next Tuesday.

God bless,

Terry