

Commitment

When I was training for the priesthood, we were expected to do some pastoral work during our summer holidays – as well as earning enough money to take us through the year. In the weeks before one summer vacation, I had been reading about St. Mungo's, a hostel for homeless people in London, and decided that that was the type of work a future missionary should be engaging in. So, I went to see the place and offered my help and they told me to come, whenever I liked during the summer holidays. However, when the summer vacation came, I discovered that I did not have the courage to go – and for a long time afterwards, I felt very ashamed, whenever I remembered that episode.

At that time, I had not yet learnt that there is a difference between what I feel I ought to do and what I am able to do. However, even when you know that such a distinction exists, it is still very difficult, in the field of "*oughts*", to know the difference between, on the one hand, what I am able to do, but choose not to do, and on the other, and what I feel I should do, but am unable to do. I now know that I am not alone in this, and this past experience of mine has enabled me to help many, who come into the confessional, berating themselves for not living up to ideals, which, I can see, are beyond their capabilities. Part of the problem, I think, comes from the language we use when thinking and talking about our faith. We so easily fall into the trap of thinking of faith as a belief or cause that we have committed ourselves to, and we forget that central to our faith is the teaching on "Grace" – which is God's part in our life's journey.

I remember a talk on "commitment", given by Abbot Christopher of Worth Abbey, at the Reading Chaplaincy, some years ago. He said that up to the year 1792, the word "commitment" was only used in the context of "committing a body to the earth" - burial – or "committing someone for trial". The idea of "committing yourself to a cause" only came into use after 1792, at the time of the French Revolution but, since then, its use has become widespread, first in secular society and then gradually in religious circles and so we now commonly use phrases such as "committed Christian". Abbot Christopher, however, said that to understand our Christian vocation in terms of "commitment" is to miss the heart of what it is to be a Christian.

We each have a unique story of our living and relationship with God, but all these stories are connected, because the God I walk with is the same God you walk with and the same God all men and women have walked with, back to the time of Abraham. So, in this wider context, we share a common story, for our common relationship with God makes it so. And this is why we can turn to the Scriptures to gain insight into our own journey – for the Scriptures are the stories of people who walked with God.

The first of those stories that we know of in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is that of Abraham and the Scriptures tell us of God's Covenant with him: *Gen. 15:1-20*. In this story, we clearly see that the Covenant was something "given" by God to Abraham – and not something Abraham committed himself to bring about. (This is seen in that Abraham was in a deep sleep when God actually made the Covenant/Promise.) Abraham's part was to trust that the promise would be fulfilled. We see this same "*economy of salvation*" throughout the whole of the Scripture. In Psalm 118, for example, it says, "*Save me and I will do your will*" It does not say, "*When I do your will I will be saved.*" To be a Christian is to entrust ourselves into the hands of God, that he may mould us into what he destined us to be – his sons and daughters. And then, we are able to live as his sons and daughters – but not before!

The word "commitment", on the other hand, carries with it the idea that, if I want to obtain anything, then I must work for it – and that whatever comes to be will be the result of what I do. Such a vision of the Christian life leaves God out of the picture completely, except maybe as the inspiration. We can see the difference between these two approaches in the way "marriage" is understood. Nowadays, it is common to understand marriage as coming into existence, when the couple "commit" themselves to each other - that marriage is the result of the partners' willingness to work at it. However, when marriage is spoken of in Scripture, the basic idea is that marriage is a "receiving" of love, and when we humbly receive the love of the other, we find ourselves growing in love for our partner – and so discover the marriage of which we are becoming a part. It is this humble receiving of love that makes the marriage – not the marriage vow!

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This distinction can also be powerfully seen in the way we use the word "commit". You can "commit a sin" or "commit a crime", but you cannot "commit a virtue" – and, especially, you cannot "commit love"!

So, back to St. Mungo's – how do I react when faced with similar situations today? Because there are still situations, where I find that I cannot do what I feel I ought to do – and I have eminent companions in this (*Cf. Rm7:15*). At such times, I now turn to the Lord and say, "If the strength to do this is in me, Lord, I don't know where it is. So, I give myself and this challenge into your hands. If I have the strength to do it, then, lead me to do it with you; but, if I have not the strength, then give peace to my heart, until you have completed your work in me and I am ready to take my place at your side." When I have said that, I have done all that I can – and the rest is Grace.

Diary

It really does look like my house is nearing its completion – except for the painters, and I shall probably have to wait for about a week after they finish before moving in, because of the smell of paint. An old friend of mine has come to Bali for a visit – and the idea was that he would stay with me in my house. However, I have hopes that he might be able to spend at least one night, in my house, before he goes home. In the meantime, I am very grateful to friends who have accommodated him as well as me.

Someone I know, here in Bali, had a bad motor-cycle accident, last week, and had to be hospitalized. He has no insurance and no family here in Bali – and has alienated a lot of former friends. He spent the first four days, lying naked on a trolley in the emergency room, because there was no bed available. He had fractured his pelvis and so they could not put pants on him and the other coverings kept falling off – because he was alone and had no one to help him, whereas other patients had friends or relatives with them all the time, who fed them, cleaned and cared for them. Fortunately, there are some good guys in the world and they have been doing what they can for him and he will be released from hospital soon – but not before he has paid a bill for roughly £6,000! One of my memories of England is the complaints of people about taxes, many of which help finance the National Health Service. Having just witnessed what it would be like to live without such a Service, I am reminded of that song, "Let me take you by the hand, and lead you through the streets of London", but in this case it would be "through the wards of Bali".

I went to prison this week, to visit a couple of Australian guys. I got in because I was on the visiting list of one of them, who under death sentence. But, when I got to the visiting area, I saw that his girl-friend was with him and she was obviously comforting him far better than I ever could, so I visited with another Australian lad, whom I know well and had a very pleasant time with him. But, it was sooooo hot under the plastic roof of the visiting area.

Two guys, who need a new beginning

I know two lads here, who need a new start in life. I have listened to and with others have checked their plans and believe they will work.

1. A lad who came out of prison about six months ago. He cannot get a job because of his record, but he would like to start a small laundry with a friend. He has collected the things he will need, such as iron, ironing board, transport to collect and deliver laundry etc. He now needs six month's rent for a small shop (his own house is just not suitable) and the money for a washing machine. We can get all this for about £300 sterling.
2. The other lad is the one I wrote about some weeks ago. He was offering "massage" on the beach because that was the only way he knew to raise money to buy a wheelchair for his brother, who has cerebral palsy. He now wants off the beach and start a small "warung", which is a food-shop. He has worked out that there is a market for providing food for those who work in other warungs and finish work late at night. So, his venture will be 24 hrs. He has got his brother and sister-in-law willing to help him, but he needs backing. He needs about £500 sterling for this.

I am casting these two causes on the water and see where they get to.

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God bless,

Terry

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