

# ‘You’ll never walk again!’ – suffering and redemption

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When a doctor told me that I would never walk again, I thought that my world had reached rock bottom, that nothing could be worse than this. During the next couple of weeks however, I learned that I was wrong, and that my inability to put one foot in front of another was the least of my problems. Every shred of confidence was gradually torn from me, as one indignity followed another. When the crushing weight of my suffering had become unbearable, I remembered Jesus’ miracles and the command ‘Take up thy bed and walk’ seemed to ring in my ears. Yet my legs stubbornly failed to respond. My family, friends and I myself, prayed with greater zeal, different novenas were tried, including ones which claimed that they were never known to fail – they failed. That is, they failed to deliver the answer to what had long since ceased to be a humble prayer of petition, but had become a fixation.

Then gradually I saw that it was hopeless, that however hard I tried to earn a miracle, or however many Holy Masses were said, or novenas prayed, or promises made, at last, in a moment of agony, I realised that I would go to my grave a paralysed man. It was then that the tomb seemed to beckon me, like those sirens in mythology, and I knew, quite clearly but with surreal detachment, that I was on the verge of despair. Slowly, oh so painfully slowly, I began to change tack and tried to live with the truth that it might well be God’s holy will that I should not be healed of my paralysis. I could not give up that hope totally, but I simply tried to accept the fact that God’s plans for my life might not include a cure.

Over a quarter of a century later I am now able, with God’s grace, to thank Him for my injuries. Indeed, not only thank

Him, but to know quite positively and without any great act of faith, that my disability is one of the greatest blessings of my life. If this sounds unbelievable or smug, I can assure you that you are quite mistaken. Should it appear unnatural, I wholeheartedly agree. What has taken place in my heart is a supernatural phenomenon. I can declare with absolute sincerity that, to use the words of Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, O.C.D. “I would prefer to weep at the foot of the Cross and be with our blessed Lord, than share in all the empty consolations that this world can offer.”

How can I have the audacity to utter such sentiments? Simple; as a pupil of the school run by the Holy Spirit, I have learnt enough to know that my claim is true. Clearly though, I would never have the temerity to say that I preferred suffering to worldly comforts, if I was relying on my own powers, but I am not. This most stupid, hardhearted and arrogant of all students has, at last, come to understand those words of Our Blessed Lord, “Without Me you can do nothing”. Happily, the reverse is also true; with the help of Blessed Trinity, I can do all that God wishes to achieve in me, for His greater glory and my sanctification, even to the writing of words that would have appeared to me 26 years ago, sheer lunacy or the parroting of a phrase found in some ‘holy book’. St Therese expressed it this way: “Ever since I realised I could do nothing on my own, my task has no longer seemed difficult; I know that the only thing necessary is to become more and more united to Jesus – the rest will be given to me freely”.

Before my accident the idea of becoming more united to Jesus would have sounded straightforward enough. I did not appreciate then, that to get closer to Christ one has to become more detached from creatures, oneself being the most difficult

(S. F. and Fr de Malleray in conversation in the garden.)



person one has to deal with, so pressing are the claims of that ‘individual’, who at all times seeks to be the centre of attention. Yet, if one is to achieve union with God, and the alternative is too horrible to contemplate, this detachment from self-love must happen. In my case it just took an absurdly long time and I still have a long way to go.

If I were able to travel back in time to that newly injured youth, I should like to pass on to him three pieces of advice. Firstly, to tell him to pray for the gift of trusting God and then to act as if the gift had been already given to him. To say “I trust in Thee Lord” and then when he began to doubt again, probably about ten seconds later, tell him to repeat the

prayer and never to cease from this prayer until the gift of trust were granted him. Next, I would suggest whenever he thought about himself, whether it be flattering or damning, whether a worry or something comforting, unless these thoughts were part of his nightly examination of conscience, to flee from the idea as if he were running from a devil, and return at once to thinking about God or praying for one's neighbour, for love of God. Finally, I would remind him of Jesus' promise that He would give us peace. For no matter the suffering he would undergo, he would always feel Christ's gift of peace whenever he was patient and calm. Whilst, on the other hand, whatever the pleasure he was enjoying or seeking to enjoy, if it were not the will of God, it would be an enjoyment devoid of peace and therefore would become more bitter than the greatest trial. So go on young man, I would tell him, you will catch me up in about 26 years and then the way ahead will be one of confidence and light, the light that is, which comes from seeing that the Beatific Vision is not now so very far away.

S.P.F. August 2009