

Running away or turning towards

During the current pandemic one of my most watched TV programs has been 'A Place in the Sun' – endlessly repeated on a variety of channels it offers lots of opportunities to dream about getting away from it all. The idea of getting away from it all can be a good thing – we all need a holiday occasionally; we all need a place or time of rest. But sometimes getting away can become running away. Some will have seen the classic comedy from the 1970's 'The fall and rise of Reginald Perrin', some of us are even old enough to have seen it first time around rather than as a repeated TV Classic! In it, Reggie tries to escape from the boredom of his unfulfilled life by leaving everything behind, wife, family, friends, his job - he leaves all his clothing on the shore and swims off to start again.

Some of us, at one time or another and particularly in the present circumstances might, like Reginald Perrin, dream of leaving everything behind. All the ties and responsibilities that nail us down, all the daily drudge, our half-heartedness about our work, our studies or our families, the weight of our past and our failures, the worries about the future - all the things which define us.

It would be so wonderful to simply dump all the baggage of life, disappear, and start again in another place with a new passport and a Swiss bank account. In our fantasies, running away from everything would free us to start again as a new person, to become someone else more intelligent, more successful, more popular, or better looking. More the person I want to be. It can be an entirely selfish desire!

The Bible too has a famous story of someone running away from responsibilities – the story of Jonah. The first time God called him the responsibility was too much and he ran away, as far away as possible, he left everything behind to start afresh in Tarshish (which at the time was the opposite end of the known world). Of course, running from the call did him no good, we cannot hide from God. We cannot run from who we are. So, having ended up amongst the vomit of a whale, he was called a second time and this time he leaves everything, to do the will of God. He is God's chosen messenger, and reluctant as he is, through him the people of Nineveh are called to wear sackcloth and ashes as a visible sign of repentance and are saved.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, we are told the story of four fishermen who leave everything behind, all the ties and bonds of work and family, to follow Jesus. But they leave everything in response to the call: Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

The call of discipleship is a call to discover their God-given identity in a new way -

I will make you fishers of men.

The call establishes a relationship between what the disciples are, and what they are to become. Their ordinary work – fishing, drawing sustenance from the darkness of the sea, becomes a sign of a deeper reality, drawing men and women from the darkness of sin and death, into the light of Christ. That which defines them (being fishermen, their family, etc) is not ignored, but becomes the setting of an urgent call to a deeper self-understanding, it is the call of Grace.

We are each called in the same way, called to know God ever more deeply and in this to come to a greater self-awareness – and in the end this is what the call to repentance is all about. Grace does not take us from one identity to another but opens out a new and surprising depth of our identity in the life of God. Grace perfects us. The disciples leave everything behind not to escape but, in responding to the call, to discover the true depths of who they are.

For some, like the disciples in the Gospel, this call will require a leaving behind - in religious life for example. But for most people, the call will not require a complete leaving behind, but an expanded vision of who we are, and our value in God's plan. It is a call that requires of us that we also take on an expanded vision of who others are as well.

The call of Jesus during this season of Lent, which begins with the symbol of ashes, is the same as that which Jonah carried to the people of Nineveh - it is a call to repentance, because the kingdom of heaven is close at hand; it is a call not to allow sin, and all the failures of life, to define us. But more than this, it is a call, through grace, to turn to Christ as a disciple.

Grace can be seen as a free gift offered to all – a river flowing from God where we may swim freely if we choose to – **if we swim with the current it returns to God.** Most, however, it seems prefer to spend their time fighting against the current, swimming in all directions in the attempt to find their own way. Because they swim against the current everything seems harder, confusion and uncertainty reign, no wonder people want to escape and start again. The Church uses a Greek word to describe the process of turning to swim with grace - 'metanoia' and it represents a true change in direction, a penitent change, towards Jesus Christ.

The urge to escape who we are often weighs very heavily upon us. But there are no real clean slates in this life: who we are is intimately bound up with those we live with, those who have cared for us or hurt us, with our community, with our work and pastimes. Reggie Perrin discovers this when when he realises he still loves his wife and in this discovery the seeds of success are sown.

The call of God's grace doesn't offer us a new identity, the fantasy life we may have always longed for. The call to be a disciple is a call to move to an even deeper understanding of who we are, who we are called to be, who those around us are called to be – it is a call to Love not selfishness.