

I am a walker. I have always been one. Something draws me out among the winding lanes and hedgerows, where I can see the hawthorne change with the seasons, and then I can finally hear it. I can hear the whispering, like the murmur of the wind, only lower, more subtle. It always whispered to me, I figured, even before I knew Him by name, as I roamed a different landscape, and felt peace growing inside of me like a flower. I walk and I talk and I listen. Often I talk more, but still catch whispers, and I know that I was praying.

While my walks would seem solitary, I know I do not walk alone. Christians for time immemorial have been assured of this one thing, whatever may come they won't walk alone. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me" affirms David in Psalm 23, and believers down the centuries stated the same thing in a variety of ways. He walked the dusty roads of Emmaus, quite unrecognised by those who professed to believe in him. We are encouraged by Paul to walk with the resurrected Saviour all the days of our life. Yet the Psalmist is not silent about the road we have to take. Somewhere amidst the velvety green fields, and quiet, chattering brooks lies the Valley of the Shadows of Death, and all who live must pass through it. Jesus himself was vocal about the shadow side of our following, and he by no means preached a prosperity gospel, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33 NIV)" In Bunyan's famous allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, while Christian encounters beautiful castles, and peaceful havens, he cannot reach the Celestial City without passing through his fair share of troubles. "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." so says Buechner, American author and Presbyterian minister and he sums up quite succinctly in that line the essence of Christian theology.

I don't know about you, though, but in the midst of stewing in my personal hell, it does not always feel less hot from the fact that I'm sitting there in company. While the famous Christian martyr Polycarp reportedly was not touched or pained by the flames his persecutors made so hot on the stake, many of us, I believe from Job to Isaiah, can testify that Satan's darts sting still, and sting bad. Maybe I am not the only one to whom my Saviour's presence in my pain feels a little bit of an anticlimax at times. Polycarp may not need a fire extinguisher on the spot, yet mostly that is what I am hoping for when the flames lick my heels.

Yet, not having to get through trouble alone is not so despicable. We all know that the presence and sympathy of our loved ones is a powerful balm, when we go through hard times. Most of the time all we can do is to sit with the pain of a friend or family member, and our presence is enough. So when Scripture tells us about Jesus walking through the valley of the shadow of death, it should be comforting. A presence of a friend, and the presence of God may in very tangible ways alleviate our sufferings, yet the most painful and profound aspect of it can remain. Suffering does seem meaningless mostly, and can feel all the more desolate for it. It seems that primarily, it is suffering's meaninglessness and the silence to our question, ever rising heavenwards, "Why?", are the forces that grind on our willingness to go on the most.

As I was listening to the rhythm of my steps on those country roads, it dawned on me that Jesus's presence is not only palliative, it is transformative. The darts we are hurt by aren't always stopped. Sometimes they leave painful scars, yet when the healing hand of Jesus

passes over them, it not only disappears but also becomes incredibly beautiful, and meaningful. God is in the business of transforming ugly, and meaningless things into something sublime. In fact, he gives a, "crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.(Isaiah 61:3)"

Suffering sifted through the hands of the Saviour, can yield treasures for the soul.

As I look at the abundant greenery of the countryside, I see the sunlight feeding and caressing each blade of grass, it is easy to believe in the essential goodness of Providence. Yet those scarlet poppies and purple foxgloves have their glory days numbered as they die the death of matter allotted to them, and sink into the soil. Hundreds of years from now all that remains of their colourful effervescent is hard black coal.

The soul sinks similarly under the weight of suffering, and does it not seem to me some days that there is only hard, blackness inside of me, where once there was joy and light.

Yet inside this hard and unassuming matter, the most precious material on earth can be found. In the hands of the right master workmen, this ugly lump can be transformed into a shining diamond that reflects back the light and keeps it inside of itself, burning like fire.

I often believe that these diamonds of the soul are the only things that truly belong to me. Gained by suffering, and crafted by my Saviour they are my most precious possessions. Coward as I am, I think they are worth dying for, these shining insights into the soul of Jesus, these momentary lifting of the veils, these glimpses of Heaven. I carry them inside for now, but one day, who knows they may be, fashioned into a crown.

One thing I often say to my children when they are sad or annoyed by some fault in their stars is that " God can make something beautiful out of this." And then they smile the little condescending or rueful smile of children, who heard it a thousand times, and say, " Yes , Mama, you said that before." I say this because this is the only thing I know for sure. I say this, as someone, who wanna etch this on the plate of their hearts, so one day, when need arises, they will say that too, "God can make something beautiful out of that ."

I look at them, as they grow in the light like wildflowers and I know, know for sure that the day will come, when they'll need to be reminded. What else can I say to them?

"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid."