

Along the track

Little Things Mean a Lot

There is a timeless passage in scripture (just one!?) where the Lord tells Elijah to stand on the mountain because the Lord will be passing by. There is a great wind, an earthquake and a fire, but God is not in them. Then Elijah hears a gentle whisper and he covers himself in his cloak. It is the Lord. (1 Kings 19:11-13)

In our noisy culture, in our discourse which is so often so filled with disagreements and noisy provocations, a culture with such a fascination for the rich and the famous, it is a graphic reminder to listen for the whisper where God so often reaches out to us. Are we alert to that?

Last year Pope Francis visited Mongolia, where there are only 1,500 Catholics in that entire vast country, so the crowds were pretty small by the usual standards of Papal visits. No motorcades, no huge crowds at Masses or lining the streets. There were only about two thousand people at the Papal Mass. So why bother going? Why go all that way, and at such considerable expense, for such a meagre showing?

Pope Francis said: *"So here I am, standing at your door, a pilgrim of friendship, who comes to you quietly, with a joyful heart and the desire to find myself humanly enriched in your presence"*.

In his meeting with clergy and religious at the Sts. Peter and Paul Cathedral, the Pope said: *God loves littleness, and through it God loves to accomplish great things.... Brothers and sisters, do not be concerned about small numbers, limited success or apparent irrelevance.*

Big isn't always beautiful, being loud isn't always the best way of being heard, building 'empires' isn't always the best way of being influential, thinking big may not always help us to see what is important. It is often the smallest action that we remember, the simple act of kindness or friendship that makes its mark. The Kingdom of God, as Jesus assures us, is about mustard seeds, one of the smallest of all seeds, it is about small seemingly unimportant things, but which, in the long run, are the big things.

We can sometimes think that we don't matter much, that what we do has little impact on others or where we work or who we mix with. Some years ago I was waiting in the foyer to see the principal in a very large secondary school. A newly arrived family from Africa came into the foyer and they were very obviously very ill at ease. The person behind the desk came around to welcome them. She asked their names and gave each of them a great smile and a great welcome. "Oh, you are going to love it here!", she said. What a difference that made all round. Did that mean a lot? I suggest it did, that it was like that mustard seed, just a small gesture but a powerful one. And I still remember it twenty-five years later and I bet that family does too!

Big isn't always the most important, it is not always where we make our mark. What happens on the smaller stage – at home, in the family, in our exchanges with our neighbours and colleagues and friends, even with strangers we may encounter in shops or on the streets all make their mark. When we think about some of Jesus' most important encounters with people, it was the small gesture that made such a difference – taking the hand of that person who was considered to be 'unclean,' visiting the home of the person who was 'not acceptable' or just going out of his way to offer a word of encouragement or forgiveness. Or friendship. Little things mean a lot.

One final thought. It is worth reflecting again on the words Pope Francis said: *"So here I am, standing at your door, a pilgrim of friendship, who comes to you quietly, with a joyful heart and the desire to find myself humanly enriched in your presence"*. I wonder is that how people feel when he or she stands at the door of our church or have we become too big, too obsessed with numbers that we forget about the pilgrim who comes to us quietly. Do we just welcome those we know? Or, like Elijah, do we seek out God's presence and message in the stranger? Are we, like Pope Francis, open to being humanly enriched by the presence of those around us no matter who they are?

Regards
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