

I WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU

My grandmother used to say that she would know when she was really old because people would start calling her "Dear." *Are you alright, dear? How are you today, dear? Can I help you with that, dear?* Kindly meant but slightly patronising.

When my mother had a serious illness, she was visited by several people from her church, none of whom she knew well. She really appreciated their kindness but one evening she picked up the phone and dialled my sister-in-law's number. *"For heaven's sake, Polly, I need someone to be rude to me. Everybody is being so nice and polite I think I must be dying."*

A brave elderly gentleman told me of the time in his childhood when he fell off his bike and scraped his knees. He limped home in a lot of pain but coping stoically with it. Only when his mother rushed out, put her arms round him and said *"Oh darling, look at your poor knees,"* did he burst into tears and feel traumatised. He told me this story half an hour after his wife had died and I knew what he was trying to tell me. He had received a deadly blow but he would deal with his pain, just as long as no-one put their arms round him and said *"oh, poor Robert."*

Too much sympathy in a bad time can actually drain your strength. It can be counter-productive if it robs you of your courage, your dignity and your will to move on. It comes, I suppose, in the same category as over-protective parents who render their children permanently immature and naïve. Or carers of disabled people who take over their lives completely and rob them of such independence as they might have had. I remember reading of the journalist John Diamond who was dying of cancer and he decided to take his motorbike out for a run. Medically speaking there were many reasons why this was not a good idea for him and both his wife and his doctor could have listed those reasons and persuaded him not to go. *"But,"* he said, *"that ride made me feel like "me" again"* and that, to those who loved him, was far more important.

When you are very vulnerable, the loving care of other people makes such a difference. It gives you comfort and strength and a hope that gets you through. I am not for one moment under-estimating its value. But the best kind of care is surely the care which allows you still to be yourself, to discover your own strengths, to grow into your own courage, to maintain your own freedom of choice and not to be pushed into the role of "the passive victim."

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Which is why I have always had my doubts about those Victorian pictures of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. There he stands with a limp-looking lamb tucked under his arm and a group of sheep with dumb faces, standing around him. I lived in Wales for several years, surrounded by sheep and they are not the most intelligent of creatures. They are forever needing to be rounded up, fenced in, untangled from barbed-wire, hauled down from cliff-tops, prevented from eating something which will kill them. They need protection all their lives. They never grow into independence.

Naturally human beings have their fair share of crass stupidity and waywardness. We are quite capable of taking the wrong routes in life; of being easily led by the crowd; of getting ourselves into dangerous situations. But we do have intelligence and a

agendas to promote, just like politics today. How could he know which were the right paths to take? So he looked to God, the good shepherd. (Tony Blair- trust God but not GB?)

Being answerable to God meant that it was God to whom he looked for strength to do the right thing. It is one thing to know what is right, quite another to achieve it. By relying on God's strength, David managed to steer a course between the arrogance of thinking himself invincible and the kind of lethargy induced by continual self-doubt. Being answerable to God meant that it was God to whom he gave praise when he won victories over his enemies and therefore there was no need to take revenge, to get his own back, to keep old quarrels going for generations. He could be compassionate, build bridges, heal divisions and make peace, which was why his reign was known as the "Golden Age" in Israelite history.

Being answerable to God meant that it was to God he looked, ultimately to make sense of his life: the good times and bad, the heartbreaks and betrayal, the successes and the failures, the strengths and the weaknesses- where would it all end? Unlike his son, Solomon, who could see nothing but non-existence at the end of life, David looked to God for the final fulfilment- God's goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

I am the Good Shepherd. I will take care of you, said Jesus to his disciples and he did. He became the shepherd they chose to follow in love and trust, the shepherd who supplied them with faith and hope, strength and courage, guidance and healing, love and delight. He was the shepherd who brought out all that was finest and best in them. Because they were answerable to him, the hatred of the Jews, the sneers of the Greeks, the oppression of the Romans could not get to them. Because they were answerable to him, neither their own faults nor the irritating behaviour of the rest of the early church could destroy their community. Because they were answerable to him, they could believe in what he had told them and in all they were trying to achieve for his sake.

Jesus said, *my sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never be destroyed. No-one can snatch them out of my hand.* In the year 2008, in a complex world and a struggling Christian church this is an awesome promise made by an awesome person. If you believe what he says, then this is a shepherd worth following.

Amen.