

REAL PEOPLE: THE MAN WITH A GRUDGE

The Ancient Romans were not fools. They knew quite well that the citizens of the countries they had taken over hated their guts. They knew that in every town and city there would be underground groups of activists working against them. They knew that Roman soldiers would have to watch their backs every time they patrolled the streets.

Jericho was one of the more prosperous towns in Palestine. It was a thriving centre of commerce with plenty of work, plenty of money, plenty of social activity and the people who lived there could have enjoyed a very comfortable lifestyle if it had not been for the exorbitant taxes imposed on them by Rome. Rich people hate paying taxes, especially to a government that is not their own. Clever people will find every dodge they can to avoid paying taxes. The resistance movement in Jericho would have been clever enough and well resourced enough to be able to keep themselves well hidden until the optimum moment for a terrorist attack. So which Roman citizen would be brave enough or stupid enough to take on the job of tax-collector in Jericho?

The solution was simple. Don't give a roman citizen the job. Look for one of the locals to take it on. He can risk his neck instead.

Of course, it will not be an easy position to fill. You need a special kind of person. You need a man who is already something of an outcast so he will not care that all his fellow citizens hate him. You need a man who has so little self-esteem that he can be bought with the promise of a high enough salary, plus any extras he can squeeze out of the tax payers. You need a man with a grudge against life, a grudge that he will be only too glad to pay back in some way. You need an invisible man.

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You know, it is not all that difficult to make yourself invisible.

When a child is born it demands attention. It cries until somebody feeds it, cleans it and cuddles it. Attention is its natural birthright- *here I am. Take notice of me.*

But as it starts to grow up that birthright can be set aside.

- if the child is consistently ignored, or if he is treated badly or if he is told that he is stupid, ugly or unlovable, he can become withdrawn, try to be invisible to avoid getting hurt..
- when the time comes to start school and mix seriously with other children, any sense that you are different- in the way you look, the way you work, the place where you live, the family you come from- can make you shy and unsure of yourself. Or if you have been used to getting plenty of adoration from your parents but that seems now to be conditional on your level of academic performance, one serious failure in class can be enough to send you scuttling away from the competition altogether. You prefer to be invisible in the hopes of avoiding criticism.
- or as you get older and you realise that serious respect from your society will only come as a result of exceptionally hard work, of outstandingly decent behaviour, of making a real effort with other people, you might think that this requires far too much exertion and quietly opt out, keeping only within the boundaries of the few things you know you can do and within a tiny circle of friends with whom you are familiar. To the rest of the world you prefer to be invisible in the hopes of having an easier life.

and enjoyed by all. Things will get better, says God, but only through faith and through lives lived by faith.

Does this sound suspiciously like a soft option? A naïve suggestion in an incredibly evil world?

In one episode of the “Thin Blue Line” the police are trying to tackle the problem of juvenile crime. Inspector Grimm is of the opinion that all young people should be locked up in prison, preferably as soon as they are born. Inspector Fowler however decides to try taking some of the juvenile offenders on a weekend camping trip in the hopes of building a few bridges between modern youth and the police force. Grimm rants on and on about woolly-minded, wishy-washy liberals who have no idea about the real world and think that young thugs can be tamed by one chorus of *ging gang goolies* round the camp fire.

In one sense he is right. None of the juvenile offenders have a personality change as a result of one weekend camping trip. In fact Inspector Fowler wakes up to find that they have stolen his tent in the night. But there are signs of just one or two bricks having been laid to start the bridge of understanding and visibility between police and offenders. And maybe ten or twelve camping trips down the line, when Fowler is utterly exhausted and never wants to see a tent or anyone under the age of sixty again he may have reached a couple of the young people and helped them to feel visible again in a society which has pushed them to the edge. And they in turn may be able to bring their children up released from hatred and resentment and grudges. And one small chain of love and peace and salvation will have been forged. It is a long shot and it will take a lot out of him but Jesus thought that this way was worth it and he was willing to give everything in the hope of making people visible again, proud to be themselves, capable of taking their place in community.

It is not a soft option. It demands everything of us but it is the way of God and God has given everything for us.

I found this short prayer in a magazine from the URC Silence and Retreats network, written, I think by someone I used to know. I am sure she would not mind me reading it to you by way of conclusion:

(God) when I come full of praise for all that you have given, I face your generous face

When I come to confess all my wrongdoings, I face your forgiving face.

When I come confused and concerned, I face your comforting face.

When I come feeling frightened and lost, I face your welcoming face.

When I come angry and hurt, I face your understanding face.

When I come dull and empty, I face your radiant face.

My prayer is that others may see in me some reflection of your face. Amen.