

WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

I never really got my head round “Red Dwarf-” that television series set in Outer Space at some time in the distant future. There was too much going forward in time/ back in time/ entering parallel universes/ people who were dead coming back as holograms for me to keep up with the story. But one episode I remember very clearly. The character Rimmer is not a very likeable person. He is boring, whinging, selfish, cowardly, pathetic and the rest of the spaceship crew find him very tedious to live with. Then one day an alternative Rimmer turns up (I told you it was a confusing series). This Rimmer is a super-hero: bold, brave, highly skilled, charismatic and everybody- men, women, robots, animal mutants- they all adore him.

Why these two different versions of the same person? Apparently it all went back to a pivotal point in Rimmer’s childhood when a big decision had to be made about his future. Should he be kept down a year at school or should he move on with all his friends? At this point two parallel lifetimes developed. One Rimmer was put up to the next class and the other was kept back.

The crew automatically assumed that the miserable, pathetic, self-pitying Rimmer they had lived with was the one who had been kept down a year. It had clearly bruised his self-esteem and given him a chip on his shoulder for the rest of his life, whereas Superman Rimmer or “Ace” as he was called, had got the break and forged ahead. But to their surprise, it turned out to be the other way round. It was Ace Rimmer who had been kept back and, he said, this had forced him to get the better of setbacks, to develop his own inner strength and confidence. What could have become a huge problem had, in fact been, “the making of him.”

It was Mother Teresa, wasn’t it, who asked her nuns not to say, “*Mother we have a problem,*” when something went wrong but, “*Mother, we have a blessing.*” I can think of many crises-and no doubt so can you- when it would be very difficult to call a situation a “blessing” rather than a “problem” but she did have a point. There are circumstances when what appears from one angle to be a huge problem, turns out, from a different angle, to be a blessing and it is all to do with how you look at it.
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Two people are walking along a quiet road. It is a pleasant evening but they are not enjoying the fresh air, basking in the sun or listening to the birds singing. They are plodding slowly, heads bowed, eyes red and sore from crying, hearts bursting with pain, anger and betrayal.

A stranger walks beside them and asks why the long faces.

“*Where have you been for the last few days?*” They answer ungraciously.

“*The whole city is abuzz with what happened to Jesus of Nazareth.*”

“*What happened?*” asks the stranger.

Hanging onto their manners and their emotions by the skin of their teeth they tell him what happened: “*Jesus of Nazareth was a great man. We had hoped that he would be the Promised Saviour of our nation. But he was executed three days ago on trumped up charges brought by our religious leaders. We buried him in a tomb and now some women are going around saying that his body has gone.*”

“*Well,*” says the stranger, “*and what’s your problem?*”

I can only conclude that the two friends were so traumatised by recent events that they had not the strength in them to take this stranger and bang his head on the rocks. They were going through hell- pain at seeing a beloved friend suffer and die; anger at the

cruelty and cunning of powerful people; betrayal by God as all their hopes were dashed- and now this man asks “*what’s your problem?*” You think, well whatever you do, sir, don’t join the Samaritans or the suicide rate will treble overnight.

But the stranger is not unsympathetic to their pain. He does not tell them to pull themselves together or think of people who are worse off than they or count their blessings- all highly irritating advice when you are at rock bottom. He explains the situation to them in a different way. This was not a triumph of death over life, of injustice over fairness, of evil over good. This was not a thwarting of God’s will for his people. Despite the trauma, this was something which had to happen and which might just be the making of God’s people.

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So how did he work that out?

The Jewish people had always seen themselves as “God’s chosen people” and they had stories to tell of great leaders such as Abraham, Moses and Elijah who had heard God’s voice and received God’s power to make their nation “God’s chosen people.” But there are two different ways of interpreting the role of “God’s chosen people” and you find both of these expressed in the Old Testament.

One way was the way of privilege. God has chosen us to be his people and therefore he will look after us. He will fight on our side against our enemies. He will keep our land safe and prosperous. He will make us so great and so powerful that the whole world will envy and admire us. You find a lot of this in the Psalms which were sung in the temple. *Our God is an awesome God. Let all the nations tremble before him and know that we are his people. Be afraid.*

But things had not always gone according to this plan. The nation had not remained safe and untroubled. Super-powers had invaded their land, enslaved their people and desecrated their holy places. And how could this happen to God’s chosen people, they had asked? Was it a punishment for sins? A testing time to see how faithful they could be? A direct challenge to God by the forces of evil?

Gradually their hopes had become focussed on a Saviour, a “Messiah,” they called him. He would be filled with the power of God and rescue them. He would drive out their enemies, get rid of the wrong-doers, renew their religion and restore the nation to its former glory.

These two on the road to Emmaus were among those who had believed in Jesus as the promised Messiah and pinned all their hopes on him. But if God’s Messiah could be crucified, something had gone terribly wrong with God’s plan and now what was to become of them? They had “one hell of a problem.” Could not the stranger see that?

But there is another way of looking at the role of “God’s Chosen People.” And this is the way of responsibility. God had not chosen Israel to be a privileged minority in a cruel world. He had called them to receive his Word, his message, his power and share it with the world. They were to be the movers and shakers, the music makers and dreamers of dreams. They were to be the warriors of light in a world of darkness. You find a lot of this message in the book of Isaiah- written through good times and bad, understanding what the role of his people should be. *It is not enough for you to serve only your own nation. You are called to be a light to the world.*

George Caird writing on Luke’s Gospel, says that *God’s purpose was the emergence of a holy people, dedicated to his service; and in a world organised to resist his will,*

live by the light and truth of God, by the saving power of Jesus Christ and to save the world. And even if we can only do this one small step at a time, within one small circle at a time that is why we are here and we should measure everything we do by that calling. We have a reason for living that makes sense.

And the amazing thing about being God's chosen people is that you can fulfil this role no matter where you are or what is happening to you at any one time. It is not a role you have to abandon when you make a big mistake or when you lose your physical strength or when you have your doubts or when something terrible is happening in your life. Men and women have been a means of bringing God into the life of the world in prisons and concentration camps; in hospitals and hospices; in places of work, schools and colleges; in areas of serious deprivation and in corridors of power. They have passed on God's saving word-even without being aware of it- when they have been seriously ill, seriously depressed, torn apart by grief, shaking with fear, facing ridicule, coping with stress.

God says, *"I have made and I will bear. I have called and I will enable. You are here because I have called you and the Word I have entrusted to you will not return to me empty and unfulfilled."*

So what's your problem, asks the stranger on the road to Emmaus.

They listen to what he has to say. They look at their situation from a different standpoint. Despite their pain, they start to understand who they are and why they are here. They ask the stranger to come in, sit down and eat supper with. Then they see that he is Jesus, always with them, and there is no problem.

Amen.