

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Historically, for us, this is Jesus – and he refers to himself in this way. It is virtually an inevitability that the rejected stone should become the most important stone in the whole building. The prophet Isaiah says: “He was despised and rejected of men” (Is 53:3). It is always that which is despised and rejected which holds the key to salvation, because it is that which completes and makes whole.

Each of us is called to grow into a unique and personal holiness, but we can never enter it without that thing in ourselves that we most despise and reject, because it is the very thing that makes us whole. Wholeness and holiness come from the same etymological root and mean the same thing psychologically. It is only our skewed understanding of what holiness is that makes us imagine otherwise. What do we think of, for example, when we hear the word ‘holiness’? Perhaps we recall the labours of the saints, or imagine being at prayer for hours at a time, or living a pure life, a disciplined life, or giving everything we have to God, or undertaking heroic penances; but I don’t believe that this would be thinking along the right lines at all.

Every Sunday at Mass, in the Gloria, we say: ‘You alone are the Holy One’, but what do we mean by that? God doesn’t pray, he doesn’t do penance, he doesn’t fast, he doesn’t give up meat on Fridays or chocolate for Lent, he doesn’t go on

retreats – so how is he holy? Essentially, God’s holiness means that he is entire and whole, lacking nothing, undivided in the plenitude of his Being. It would be impossible for God’s holiness to have any other meaning. In Matthew 6:22 Jesus says: “The lamp is the eye of the body. If your eye is single, your whole body will be full of light.” ‘Single’ means undivided, whole. God is not at war with himself. His eye is single.

Holiness is not about dividing but reconciling. If we divide ourselves into those aspects that we consider socially, personally and spiritually acceptable and those we do not, we are missing the point. It isn’t about cutting off a portion of our being because we don’t like it, or would prefer not to have it, or because we find it too troublesome; rather, it means reconciling conflicting opposites within ourselves: light and dark, sunshine and shadow, accepted and rejected. Nicholas of Cusa said the same thing about six hundred years ago, and he called it ‘the coincidence of contraries’. He said that’s what God is: the reconciliation of all opposites in a perfect wholeness of being. The deepest meaning of ‘holiness’ is ‘wholeness’, of being ‘sound’ in the sense of being totally complete and lacking nothing. It isn’t a matter of quantity but quality: it is a wholeness of being. Understanding holiness as a matter of personal piety is a swift path to neurosis.

In the gospels it is always the despised and rejected that saves, heals, or that is the lynchpin of the story. In the parable

of the Good Samaritan, it is the outcast Samaritan who has compassion on the man beaten and robbed by thieves, not the priest or the Levite; in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, it is the tax collector who goes home at peace with God – not the Pharisee; in the account of the curing of ten lepers, the only one to come back and thank Jesus is a Samaritan, a foreigner. The one person to whom Jesus most unambiguously revealed himself was a Samaritan *and* a woman, who would have been despised by orthodox religionists on both counts. In fact, Jesus embodies this in his own person; if he had not been despised and rejected, he would not have died on the cross and would not now be called our Saviour.

I think it is inescapable: that which is most despised and rejected is the key to wholeness and holiness; this is true both in the macrocosm of the world and the microcosm of the human individual; it is true collectively and individually. The medicine enters where the wound is deepest; the radiance of God's mercy shines where the sin is darkest. Pope Francis knows this instinctively and his words reflect it. Each one of us has some weakness, some moral or spiritual failing, some fault, some constant temptation to sin that we cannot overcome and of which we are ashamed. We would, if we could, tear it out of ourselves and be rid of it for good; but then we would be insufferable. If we cast no shadow, no one could bear us.

To acknowledge and not reject that which we despise in ourselves is certainly not to practice it or live it out. It is to own and accept it and offer it to God with the rest of ourselves. The Anglican writer and mystic Martin Israel said this:

“We should really love ourselves in our entirety and not in any way ignore those facets of our character which are disagreeable. Self-knowledge does not flinch from any experience or attitude, no matter how unpleasant, or even criminal, it may be. If a person accepts it generously as a part of his or her own character, it is gradually transfigured into something quite beautiful.” (...) “It is not wrong to envy or even hate someone, so long as we are aware of its impropriety and, in silence, give it to God. This is in fact the nature of prayer itself. The end of our growth as individuals is wholeness, to be not so much good, as complete and whole.”

Take the opposites of compassion and anger, for example. Living with the contraries of compassion and anger within ourselves, one acceptable to us and the other not, could mean getting angry about the right things, injustice and inequality, not denying our anger but integrating it. Or the apparent painful contraries of sympathy and prejudice deep in our hearts – could mean learning to truly appreciate the feelings of those who suffer prejudice and doing something about it, not refusing to acknowledge our prejudice but integrating it. Or living with the contraries of sexuality and

spirituality – God knows those two have for so long been seen as opposites – could mean developing a deeper understanding of the nature of the Incarnation and the beauty of creation, not attempting to stifle our sexual feelings, but integrating them. Then we are not at war with ourselves, not a house divided and unreconciled, but made complete and whole.

Years ago, in the Ursuline convent in Brentwood, jigsaws were very popular with many of the older sisters. They would be spread out, worked on and completed at several large tables in the library that had been put there especially for the purpose. There they were, complete and whole: Trafalgar Square, Galway Bay, Horses in a Field, Constable's Haywain, Ships, Trains, Town scenes and Country scenes. Then, on a particular weekend, one of the sisters – no one discovered who, nor what impish impulse impelled her – crept down in the middle of the night, carefully removed one piece from every completed jigsaw and made off with it. The discovery of this the next morning caused something close to hysteria. Having witnessed this myself, I can tell you that a completed jigsaw with one single piece deliberately removed, is a thing of angst! For that little gap, that flaw in perfect wholeness, screams to be filled. It's almost a psychological thing: it becomes a symbol of everything that longs in its depths for completion. It is – you could say – unholy. It is also pretty much how we feel when we reject some part of ourselves and are a house divided.