

I know I've mentioned this before, but it's worth repeating because we can so easily forget.

Jesus said: "Therefore you must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." By that he did not mean moral or spiritual spotlessness. He did not mean that we have to be sinless, free of all faults, shining white, with a holy smile forever on our lips; this would be impossible for us and Jesus never commanded the impossible. Besides, if we were perfect we would be insufferable.

He actually went on to tell us what he meant by perfection, and what he meant perhaps comes as a surprise. He said: "Therefore you must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect; for he makes his sun to shine on good and bad people alike, and his rain to fall on the just and unjust equally." In other words, Jesus says that perfection means treating all people equally, friend and foe alike and judging no one; according to the Lord, then, perfection does not mean being fault-free, it means being judgment-free. Human beings will always have to struggle against their faults and sins. St Peter and St Paul certainly did.

Peter was a rough, down-to-earth fisherman. He didn't

know anything about philosophy or theology or religious law – and probably didn't care. He could be pig-headed, argumentative, stubborn – and he was constantly getting hold of the wrong end of the stick. In the end he was so afraid of punishment and death that he betrayed Jesus.

Paul was an entirely different man. He was well-educated, intelligent, he could speak and write about philosophy, theology and religious law, and he had been brought up as a Pharisee. Yet he was a man of astonishing contradictions and he also suffered from some persistent moral weakness, that he begged God to take away, but which wasn't. Paul could also be vain about his achievements and was frequently pushy. St Paul was a classic neurotic, but it would be another two thousand years before that term was first used.

These two men, warts and all, were called and chosen by Jesus. Peter was called *because of* his pig-headedness, not in spite of it; Paul was called *because of* his neuroticism and moral weakness, not in spite of it.

In the Book of Joshua, Rahab is acclaimed as a heroine, because she hid and arranged for the escape of two Jewish spies in Jericho. Yet She was a Canaanite, not a

Jew. Canaanites were hated as a people by virtually every culture and nation that surrounded them.

She was a woman. A Jewish prayer offered daily by rabbis said, “I thank my God that I was not born a woman.” Women were at best second-class citizens.

She was a prostitute using her bodily charms to earn a living. And like prostitutes in all cultures, she was marginalized by society.

God called and chose her.

This perspective has always been really hard to get used to – somehow, it makes us uncomfortable – that, as St Paul himself says:

“God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly and the despised of this world (...) to accomplish his works.”

And this is because he can turn every fault, every flaw, into an advantage:

- Rahab was a despised Canaanite and that was an advantage, because no one would have suspected a Canaanite of hiding Jewish spies...
- she was a woman and when the guards of Jericho were

searching for the spies, no one would have paid her the slightest attention anyway...

- she was a prostitute and no one but a paying customer would have even lowered themselves to approach her. All this is God using the foolish, the weak and the despised to accomplish his work.

Now we have to interiorise all of this – because ‘in here’ is where it really belongs – and see it as something within ourselves. For instance, if we have a short fuse, a quickness to anger, God would use that – if we own it in ourselves and offer it to him – to generate anger against things that really matter, like inequality, injustice, poverty, political hypocrisy, etc. All these faults and failings which we imagine keep us from God, actually bring us closer to him and enhance our life in this world for the good of others.

This is particularly true of a love that perhaps we feel is shameful or in shadow. Perhaps we have suffered the agony and the ecstasy of unrequited love, or illicit love, or a love that hurt another, or maybe we live in the memory of a past love, or surrender to fantasies of impossible love; we might think that these things keep us

far from God; the truth is, if we own them and offer them to him, they will bring us closer to God, because one way or another he will use them to enhance our life in this world for the good of others.

This is exactly what he did with SS Peter and Paul, I'm glad to say.