



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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TENSION

Tension is characteristic of our age. Whole industries have been spawned to provide for tense people. Ours is the age of Valium and relaxation exercises, of tension headaches and stress management seminars. People complain of the pressure of work and family. Christians are not untouched by the problem, and we all too often excuse our impatience and anger and intolerance by saying, "I've been under a lot of stress lately." When it drives us to excuse our own sin, tension is clearly a spiritual problem.

No doubt it is often an emotional or physical problem as well -- and so requires emotional and physical treatment. But as Christians we ignore the spiritual side at our peril. We are spiritual beings as well as emotional and physical. Most of us have experienced tension as a spiritual affliction, inimical to prayer and Christian life.

We all know tense people (perhaps ourselves): preoccupied with many things, always rushing around with too much to do, worried about their responsibilities, unable to sit still or relax. They find it virtually impossible to pray. For prayer requires that one sit still and be quiet: to do nothing outwardly. Even if they manage to take the time to sit down, quiet will not come. Instead the mind is filled with all the responsibilities and preoccupations.

The source of tension need not be strictly worldly and secular. It is possible to be tense about church work as well. This is an occupational hazard for clergy, and not unusual among the keen laity. We can worry about the parish bazaar, the behaviour of the acolytes, getting all the linens done, the unending work of the property committee, and so on. We might even justify our preoccupation on the grounds that it's for the church. We try to tell ourselves that it doesn't matter that we cannot pray, because we are doing a good work instead. That is self-deception, of course, but we may try it for a while anyway.

The root stress (one form of it, at least) is to be found in how we understand ourselves as human beings and as Christians. We are tempted to think that we are who we make ourselves by our deeds. We judge ourselves according to what we do. The deeds which we present to the world: that is who we are. It is not just that we think that the world will judge us this way -- though that is often the case. Even more, we judge ourselves this way. Though we may not always acknowledge it, we gauge our worth according to our accomplishments. If things do not work out or if we do not get everything done, then we feel wretched: we think we are not worthy persons. This is a sign that we are identifying ourselves with our accomplishments.

If we do this, we are letting ourselves in for a bout with stress and tension. If we stake our self-esteem on accomplishing things, then we have put ourselves under the pressure of accomplishing our goals. If we fail in the accomplishment, we will not be able to love or respect ourselves. We thus bind ourselves into a situation of pressure. The stress is largely of our own creation. The goals may of course be set by our job or profession (or even our Rector!), but we make them stressful by staking our identity upon them.

So it comes down to the question: Who are we? Are we the sum of our accomplishments? Are we self-made men? Or are we created by Another? As Christians, we believe that God made us, and that He has redeemed us, having made us Christians by His own free act. This must be fundamental to our understanding of ourselves. We are His creatures, loved by Him and destined by Him for heaven.

This means that on the most fundamental level who we are is determined by God's act and not our own. Our accomplishments do not materially change what God has done: He has given us our essential identity as people and as Christians. As human beings we are made in His image, and as Christians we are redeemed from our sin by Jesus' sacrifice. Whatever we do, we cannot add a cubit to our height nor anything to the work of the Cross. The essentials are complete -- whether we care to take notice or not.

Thus: we need not worry about who we are. That is given to us by God's free and generous gift. We ought to respond to the gift, and to base our lives upon the wondrous knowledge of such love for us. But we need not create it ourselves. And there is the key to letting go of stress.

The cure begins when we recognize that our identity is secure, because it is God-given and not man-made. We need never doubt it. We need not stake our lives on the effort to build something for ourselves. We need only accept what God has done.

This is not easy, of course. We live in an age which places a premium on action. It is a competitive age, where ambition is ad-

mired. Although self-made millionaires may not be the heroes they once were, they are still envied if not admired. Personal initiative, accomplishment, success, these are the values of the age. Since we live in this culture, we inevitably share them to some degree. We can be easily seduced by this false foundation for human life: that our actions determine who we are. This is where Christians must be careful. For we believe that actions are important. But we do not believe that they are more important than God's actions. Our identity -- who we are deep down -- is His doing and not ours.

A second obstacle is our pride. We do not like to admit that we do not create ourselves. We like to think that we are responsible for ourselves. We like to take pride in what we do, and to think that when we accomplish something difficult and wonderful, we are that much better than everyone who has not done so. To a large extent, we take pride in our deeds in order to feel better than other people.

We are also afraid of accepting our identity from Another. That is threatening to us. It seems to make us vulnerable if we do not create our own identity. For the other might not give it to us, or he might not give us the identity that we want. If we do not define ourselves, we run the risk of finding that we are not who we thought we were. Christians discover along the way that they are not who they thought they were when they started -- but are rather immensely greater because the love of God has made them so. But there is a risk entailed in admitting that our identity comes not from ourselves but from God.

In fact, when we pretend that we can create our own identity, we are playing at being gods. We arrogate to ourselves God's creative prerogatives. The falseness of the pretension is shown by our inability actually to create life, even our own. Man is by nature dependent -- on other men, on creation, and even on God. This impels us to admit that we are creatures and not creators. The limits of our powers on earth force us to face the reality: we are made by Another.

So if we can bring ourselves to admit that our identity is given by God, we can begin to let go of stress. Our actions are then no longer aimed at securing our own respect and that of those around us. Rather, they are the responsibilities God has given us. He can judge how well we fulfill them much more justly than even we can. For He knows about all the other circumstances which affect how things turn out. Even if the results seem disastrous, He knows that we did the best we could and were faithful. This knowledge takes the pressure off producing results. We can relax and get on with what we need to do.

For a Christian the motivation behind the deed is changed radically. The nonchristian must succeed or he will not be worthy to himself or others: the deed defines his worthiness. For the

Christian, the deed is the service of the Master who has already provided His full and unconditional love. Whether the results come out or not, the love will be there. The focus shifts from the accomplishment to the One who is served by the deed.

Christians, receiving their identity as God's gift, will not then be inactive. Paradoxically, they can get even more done than those who are constantly tense about everything. For Christians need not waste all the energy that others spend in worry. They are freed by God's love to get on with the deeds themselves. The time that they spend in quiet and prayer is not "active" time, but neither is it wasted time. For it secures the foundation, the willed reception of our nature from God. It also serves to keep all the activities in their proper place: as service and not self-creation.

Christians must therefore spend time in quiet regularly. The quiet must focus on who we are as we stand before God, even more than what we do. Our prayers will often turn to our particular responsibilities. We will share them with God, asking His guidance and grace to fulfill that which falls to us in our station in life. But from time to time we must also withdraw a little from all the things that we are doing in the world, and look to how we stand before God. We should then ask ourselves, "What is important to me in life?" The answer to that will tell us whether we are loving God with our whole heart, and whether we are accepting our identity from Him. Some changes in how we think of ourselves may be required.

We need to look at our life to see if it accurately reflects what is important to us. We may want to accept life from God and serve Him, and yet spend most of our energy in stressful endeavors to be successful -- for ourselves. Such a life is not conformed to our profession as Christians. It needs to be reformed, by God's grace.

Looking at the way we live, and the way we find our self-esteem, we should ask, "Do I believe that God has made me and redeemed me? Do I live as though I believed it?" This self-examination is not easy, and may not be pleasant. But it will help to keep us on the straight and narrow.

Living out our identity as God has given it to us is tremendously liberating. It allows us to do what we have to do without stress, and without disruption to our prayer. It allows us to do our tasks wholeheartedly and attentively, because we have not staked our being on the results. The outcome we commend to our Master, in whose service we are performing our actions. We are called not to idleness but to His service. This activity, however frantic it may become, need not be stressful: it can never separate us from the love of God. And that is the only thing we really need to fear.

