

The Pilgrim

I began the spiritual journey in a fervour of prayer, asking God to give me the companions I needed for the road. The voice in my heart was gentle but firm. “Name your needs.”

Ah, but that was easy. There were three whose company represented my constant longing. “Wisdom! Compassion! Holiness!” I cried.

The voice in my heart agreed that these were excellent choices, and then it left me. I wasted no time but set out, delighted that I had found favour in God’s eyes and that I was to travel with goodness at my side. But my companions did not appear. I looked for them along the road. I called their names in vain. Indeed, I was so concerned with finding them, that at first I didn’t notice the three ruffians who followed me at a short distance. They were travellers of the worst kind, ragged, shifty-eyed, probably thieves and possibly murderers. I tried to outpace them. They walked faster. I stopped at a wayside shrine, hoping that they would pass. They stopped too.

“Who are you?” I cried.

The man with the bandaged hands, said, “My name is Error.”

The woman with matted hair and a crooked back, laughed and said, “I am Pain.”

The oldest of the three, a man with no hair and thick-lenses spectacles, said, “People around here call me Doubt.”

Error, Pain and Doubt! At last I understood what was happening. These three had been sent to test me. Christ had met evil in the wilderness and I must expect the same kind of trials. If I proved worthy, then I would receive the companions I’d requested.

It was not difficult to reject these disreputable creatures. “Be gone from me!” I shouted, raising my hand.

My order had the most extraordinary effect. They shrieked with laughter, falling against each other, hooting and howling and holding their sides. “That is good!” cackled Error. “Do that again!”

“Wonderful performance!” agreed Pain.

I tried a more reasonable approach. “Look, I’m on a sacred journey and this road leads directly to God. You must go. There is no place for you here.”

They were still smirking and nudging each other. “Oh yeah?” said Doubt.

“That’s what you think,” said Pain, grinning through her tangled hair.

They watched with interest while I prayed. “O God, come to my aid. O Lord, make haste to help me.”

Nothing happened. I sighed, convinced more than ever, that this was a time of trial which would soon pass. I continued on the road and they shuffled along behind me, now closer than ever. The fact that I was continually aware of their presence, interfered greatly with my prayer and songs of praise.

As the days past, the company of Error, Doubt and Pain became so troublesome that my songs of rejoicing to the Lord my God, fell away to nothing, replaced by a constant prayer to be rid of these foul companions. I was deeply troubled and all the more so because it seemed that the voice of my heart was silent. Like the prophets of old, I felt that God had abandoned me in my time of trial. As for Error, Doubt and Pain, in spite of repeated rejection, they had become more bold and were now travelling beside me, wanting to engage me in conversation. There were times when I had to walk

with my fingers in my ears. My pace was so slow that I feared I would never make the distance.

One night, in the deepest despair, I called out in prayer, “Help me!”

At once I felt the softening of the heart that indicated the presence of God, and the voice, warm yet firm, said, “What do you want?”

“Help me to get rid of them!” I cried.

“Why don’t you listen to what they have to say?” said the voice.

“You can’t be serious!” I cried.

“Listen to their stories,” the voice insisted.

“But Lord, these are evil beings. They represent everything you detest!”

“Oh really? Who told you that?”

I was silent, for it seemed that this too, the faithful voice in the heart, was quietly mocking me.

In spite of my concerns, I slept well that night. In the morning I allowed Doubt to walk beside me and I didn’t stop my ears when he began to talk. “Nice scenery, isn’t it?” he said.

At least, I thought, I don’t have to answer.

“Have you noticed that we’ve been going up hill?”

I looked at the road, and yes, it was sloping upwards.

“Getting steeper,” said Doubt, “but the views are getting better. You can see a lot more now, can’t you?”

I had to nod in agreement.

“Pilgrimage is interesting,” says Doubt. “It’s all about movement. You leave some things behind but you go on to a wider and better view. It’s called progress.” He looked at me and gave a sly cackle. “Ever heard of Pilgrims Progress?”

I still could not bring myself to speak to him.

“Of course,” he said, “there are pilgrims who don’t get very far because they don’t want to leave the signposts of their childhood. You see them sitting in the road. But that’s okay. God’s got plenty of time.”

When he mentioned God, I looked sharply at him. ‘Do you know God?’

“Oh sure. We’re great buddies.”

He’s lying, I thought. So I said to him. “What does God look like?”

“Don’t ask,” said Doubt. “I’ll tell you something today and tell you something different next month.”

“Because you’re a liar!” I cried triumphantly.

“Nope. Because I tell the truth,” said Doubt. “It’s about movement, remember? Leaving things behind? Signposts? Images of the Divine?”

I refused to answer. I’d had enough of his company for one morning and was relieved when he stepped back a pace or two; but the peace did not last long. Pain came sidling up and tried to take my arm. I shook her away.

She laughed. “No one wants to walk with me. Funny, that. Can’t say I blame you. There was only one who welcomed Pain with wide open arms and even he had some misgivings.”

I refused to look at her.

“Trouble is, most people are so busy running away from hurt, that they miss it’s messages. Oh yes, there’s a lot to learn from Pain.”

Like what? I thought, keeping my eyes on the road.

“Pain can be like a hard-bristled broom,” she said. “It can sweep the unreal from our life and make space for the real. It can also be a kind of pressure gauge telling us when we’re stuck. That’s especially true for emotional pain.”

I thought of the pain in my own life and was angry that she should trivialise it, but still I did not look at her.

“No one ever wants pain,” she said. “But there are ways of dealing with it.”

“How?” I snapped, unable to hold silence any longer.

“By acknowledging its existence. By working with it instead of running away from it. By listening to what it is saying. Pain, you know, is a part of the wholeness of God.”

Now I was good and angry. I turned on her. “What do you know about God?”

She drew her hair back to look directly at me. “Not as much as God knows about me,” she said with a slow smile.

As I suspected, it was now Error’s turn. He fell into step beside me and I looked down at the dirty bandages on his hands, and the scars that showed at the edges. “Giddyay,” he said, meeting my gaze.

I quickly looked away.

“Not speaking, eh? I said to the others, I said, I’d better go last because I’m the most unpopular. People make excuses for Pain and Doubt, but not for Error. I’m at the bottom of everyone’s list.”

Well he’s right about that, I thought.

“The nearest I got to good publicity was ages ago, when some guy in the Church called me a happy fault. He’d just realised that people who don’t make mistakes, don’t make anything. He’d finally worked out why I was here.”

I kept walking. I was thinking that whoever had called him a happy fault was half right. The last half.

“I might be unpopular but it’s a huge job. The big apple. You know, the knowledge of good and evil in the one fruit? If you haven’t known error how can you choose good? But there you are, most people don’t see it that way. As soon as error pops up in their lives, they blame someone else. You know why they do that?”

I don’t answer. He’s going to tell me anyway.

“Because they want to see themselves as good. Huh! Let me tell you something. You think there are evil people in this world? The evil you see out there is done by people convinced of the goodness of their motives. They never learn, you see. They pretend they don’t know me.”

“That’s because they see you as the enemy,” I replied.

Error shrugs. “I’m the enemy of pride. I’m the friend of spiritual growth. If pilgrims value my guidance, I show them how to find the compass needle that points to true North. But okay, I don’t expect you to greet me like a long lost friend. We’ll talk again tomorrow.”

They left me alone for the rest of the day and that night, camped some distance from me. By the next morning, I found that I was ready to resume conversation with them and was even able to ask questions.

Doubt told me that when we are young, we are like trees that need careful staking and tying, to protect us from strong winds, but later, as we grow, the same stakes and ties that have given us support can interfere with our growth. “Let me put that in other words,” said Doubt. “When you’re a child on the journey, you need the security of a narrow road but as you advance the way will broaden. God will keep calling you to a larger place until you discover that your road has no horizons at all. Everywhere you look, you’ll see the Divine.”

It was Pain's turn. She talked about deep anguish and how time could render it down to rich compost for growth. She asked me had I noticed that people who had done great things for humanity, had come from backgrounds of pain. "They are the ones who have learned from me," she said. "But not all manage that. There are some who avoid me, and others who use me to get attention. They don't understand that pain is a birthing process."

Now Error fell into step beside me. He spoke a lot about humility. He said did I realise that perfection had no space for growth and no need for the Divine. Had I really thought of that? I said, no, I hadn't, and he laughed. "Why do you think Jesus chose sinners for friends?" he said.

The days passed in conversation and the miles flew by, even though the road was now quite steep. Instead of praying to be rid of these fellow-travellers, I now thanked God for them, for in spite of their appearance, I had learned greatly from them. I was now sure that they had been sent by a wise and loving God as the companions I needed, rather than those I had requested.

One morning I told my good friend Doubt that I finally understood what he meant when he told me that the images of God changed with journey.

He looked pleased. "Just like our names," he said.

"Your names?" I echoed.

"Sure," said Doubt. "Haven't you worked it out yet?"

"I don't understand," I said. "Worked what out?"

"Our other names." Doubt put his hand on Pain's shoulder. "This is Compassion," he said. Then he held up Error's scarred hand. "His other name is Wisdom."

I looked at Pain and Error, and felt their truth in my heart. “And you?” I asked Doubt.

He chuckled. “Yep. I’m Holiness.”

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