

## Definition of a Wimp: a timid or unadventurous person

I remember a old priest telling me – when I was but a novice in a religious order – that the order's novitiate (spiritual training) year was like a barrel into which rough edged stones, sharp, broken, abrasive, were to be rotated, turned over and over, to be ground against each other until they all became smooth – uniformly smooth, no rough edges. Only then were they fit to be called “religious”. Translating that into plain talk it seemed to mean we were to restrain our imaginations, discipline our behavior, fall into line, be not assertive but humble, maintain “custody of the eyes” – virtuous in those ways – in other words to subordinate one's will – i.e. become smooth, easy to handle, to direct . . .

Now I can see how any military training might serve that purpose but we chose to become novices, members of a religious order intent upon becoming **whole**, holy human beings, agents of Christ's Gospel, which was anything but non-abrasive, which was assertive – as evident in today's readings. I mean Isaiah wasn't called to be a prophet in order to retreat from the world and live in silence, unidentifiable. It says he was called to be *a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass against Judah's kings and princes, its priests and people.*

And in today's Gospel Jesus isn't looking for popularity, basking in the admiration of his native synagogue over his piety, his sweetness and light, his smooth talk, his reputed talent for healing. He is abrasive. He dares remind his audience that they are no better than their ancestors in their complacency, their resistance to the depths and ethics of their tradition – and that hurts: *They rose up and drove him out of town.* And so the English poet and artist William Blake (1757–1827) could write: *Was Jesus gentle . . . was Jesus Humble . . . ? When twelve years old he ran away / and left his Parents in dismay. / When after three days sorrow found, / Loud as Sinai's trumpet sound: / “No Earthly Parents I confess! - / My Heavenly Father's business! . . .”*

Of course people will object: “Today's second reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians is all about Love – being not inflated, rude, quick-tempered. Sounds like a gentle Jesus to us! Like turn the other cheek and if forced to go one mile, tag along for two. Where is the assertiveness in that?” And yes, it does sound much like don't rock the boat. But when you think about it, are patience, kindness, avoiding jealousy, pomposity, selfishness, anger, brooding an appeal to our being gentle, low profile, *nice* people? Or turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, wimpish?

Try it. It takes guts **not to strike back** when you consider how important such restraint is *so needed* in a world of mindless reflexes. It take guts to go the extra mile, to stretch oneself, to recognize the need to stretch the vision, the imagination of those who would shortchange their lives out of weariness or violence. It takes guts to be gracious, to speak truth in a synagogue.

Take the example of Sidney Carton in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. A somewhat sloppy fellow, brilliant lawyer, lacking in self-confidence, alcoholic who in the end takes the place of his look-alike Charles Darnay (he goes that extra mile which as I say takes guts). And as he ascends the scaffold to the guillotine he is described as saying (as I remember it in that wonderful voice of Ronald Colman): *It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.*

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