How much might our deepest well-being depend on the well-being of others?

This week Australian journalist Peter Greste was released from an Egyptian jail after 400 days’ incarceration. We can only begin to imagine the relief and joy he felt as he stepped out, a free man, and the range of emotions that he will surely feel as the weeks and months go by. In the past few days he has spoken of the simple things he looks forward to experiencing again - watching a sunset, feeling the sand between his toes, and of course being with his family and other loved ones. Such an experience of loss of the ordinary, everyday realities we take for granted serves to heighten awareness of their beauty, their deep-down rootedness in the heart of who we are, their inexpressible value. But as he said too, mingled with the joy and relief he feels, is a deep concern for his colleagues still behind bars. It was a very difficult and painful moment as he walked away and left them there. I am sure Peter Greste’s own joy will only be fully felt when his friends too are free.

As I have listened to the reports this week and to his own words I have been pondering this question: how much might our own deep-down well-being, peace, contentment and happiness depend on the well-being, peace and happiness of those around us? How intimately linked is our own affirmation that ‘all is well’ to knowing that ‘all is well’ with not only the people closest to us, the people we love dearly, but with all our brothers and sisters, whoever and wherever they may be? And as I’ve mused on this I’ve become aware that the answer to this question will reflect something of the state of our own soul, our own spiritual health and certainly our life as Christians.

Empathy, as we know, is a significant characteristic of a human being who is emotionally and psychologically healthy. The ability to put ourselves in the shoes of another, to walk as they walk, to feel as they feel, is a sign of healthy development. No longer the child whose world is the size of our own needs and wants, empathy takes us out of ourselves, expands our horizons. As we grow we see that there is a bigger world, a world of which I am a part and a world I must consider, respect and be mindful of, and at times I need to limit my own needs and wants to accommodate those of others. This of course can be done grudgingly or it can be done with joy and generosity. Some, sadly, never quite get there. Inability to empathize is also a symptom of a psychologically and emotionally disturbed person, as often illustrated in the perpetrators of crime who show no signs of remorse for the pain they have inflicted on others. But, more than just accommodating others’ needs and limiting my own to do so, there is also the rather challenging question of whether I can indeed be content as long as there is pain, suffering, deprivation, injustice and need of any kind in the world. How profoundly linked is my own joy to the joy of others?

From the point of view of a healthy Christian spirituality, true joy, happiness and ultimate well-being are to be found in a life ‘given to God’. The whole point of a Christian life is ever increasing abandonment to God. This is the heart of Christian spirituality. A Christian is a transformed being. A successful or well-lived life is allowing God to guide, direct and shape not only our actions and our thoughts, but our very desires - our all. Our own happiness, our own peace and well-being will
therefore depend on how fully we co-operate in this transformation. There is no other way to spiritual peace. The more we allow God to work in the depths of our being, the more profound and authentic our peace and well-being will be. Now, this doesn't mean of course that this will always be comfortable or fit in nicely with our own plans, but spiritual well-being is not about being comfortable, it’s about surrender, and the joy of such a life will be, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola said, ‘knowing that I love and serve You’.

If we are going to surrender to God’s prompting and to God’s way, we have to take very seriously our connectedness with others and remind ourselves, as Jesus points out in Matthew’s Gospel, that the measure we give is the measure we receive. In other words, our concern for others will bear fruit in our own spiritual growth and maturing, and ultimately our own authenticity as a human being. A wonderfully powerful image of the human body and the interconnectedness of its parts, used by St Paul in his letter to the people of Corinth in the first century, will help us explore this:

“The body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is there are many parts but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it”.

These words are set in the context of Paul’s reminder to the Corinthians that within the community of the new and developing church there were many different gifts, all given by God; there were many roles people had in the church, and each one was necessary and they were all of equal value. And Paul then uses this image of the body to further make his point - and it’s a most effective point! “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it”, says Paul. We all know that if one part of our body is injured or unwell it affects the whole of us. A broken limb for instance will impact on everything we do, and other parts of our body may begin to ache too as we adjust to accommodate the injured arm or leg. If we take the body as an image of community, the same is true: we know that when someone in our family is suffering, experiencing ill health or difficulty of any kind, we are all affected, we are all involved. What Paul is saying is that ‘we’re all in this together’. Within our
human community - and indeed today we have become aware that this interconnectedness extends beyond the human community to the community that is the universe - the pain and suffering, the joys and happiness of each person will affect us collectively and individually.

In his Document, *Gaudium et spes*, written in 1967, Pope Paul VI brilliantly expressed this in the document’s opening words: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds”.

We are intimately bound to one another through our shared humanity, made in the image and likeness of God. Whatever differences we may have, we are one, right there at the heart of the nature of our very being. Whatever is of concern to humanity is of concern to us. As followers of Christ we are bound to one another, for at the heart of his teaching are his commandments to “love one another as I have loved you” and to “do to others as you would like them to do to you”. Our Christian daily prayer is, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth”. This is a powerful and in fact subversive prayer which makes quite clear that what we desire is a world in which right relationships are the norm, a world in which God’s way reigns. This is a world in which relationships are characterized by justice - righting the wrongs, providing the necessities of life for all, ensuring human rights and dignity, freedom from oppression. “Your kingdom come”, we pray, and we cannot rest until we take care of the unfulfilled needs of those with whom we are so intimately one. When all is well with the world, all will be well with me, for the extent to which I work for the creation of this kingdom is the extent to which I will be the living answer to the prayer I pray each day.

This will always be both a ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ reality! Quite possibly we will never eliminate all the pain of the world. We have to live with that tension and keep at it. And as we do that, we might wonder whether there is any place of peace, any way we can really know joy and well-being? The response to that is a resounding yes! This is the peace Christ offers us, the peace which comes from knowing that we surrender our all - that we give ourselves over, abandon ourselves to God’s way. This is the peace Christ promised and which he emphasized does not depend upon agreeable circumstances, having things our way or relentlessly pursuing comfort, pleasure or material gain. This peace is the result of God’s power having full sway in our hearts. In the words of Fr John Main, the great practitioner and teacher of Christian meditation, “It is the ordinary destiny of every man and woman to be filled with the light of Christ and to learn to see everything by that light”. Fr Main sees the task of the Christian life to be open to the gifts of God, including the gift of knowing and experiencing the God that is Love. The more we rest in that God of Love, through prayer,
meditation, contemplation, the more we will be both nourished into peace and the more sensitive we will become to the brokenness of the world.

There is a wonderful dynamic at work here: we are invited into a deep and lasting personal or inner peace and we are sent out to work for peace in the world. The more profoundly we enter into prayer the more sensitive we will become to our unity with all people, indeed with all creation. We will see the God who is Love and Life in all things and in all people. We will be acutely sensitive to where the God of Love and Life has been pushed out by injustice, marginalized by oppression, denied by our indifference to the cry of those in most need. Communion with God inspires the desire for communion with others. We will rise above the differences that divide us and we will understand that our own destiny, our own ultimate transformation, is tied up in the destiny of others. We are not isolated individuals simply pursuing our own dreams and fulfilling our own needs. Our true identity is this mystery of Christ dwelling in our hearts, having its way with us. We may try to run away from this and close our eyes to pain and need, to the cries of those with whom we share this precious life, but if we don’t recognize that our ultimate spiritual health is bound up in our sharing the pain and suffering of others and doing all in our power to alleviate it, we will simply remain a child.

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