

A recent political cartoon has a parent with a child playing the violin and the caption: 'If Mrs May has taught us anything it's that persevering isn't always such a good idea.' It's certainly true that perseverance isn't always an easy thing, but it's also true that it can be mistaken for all manner of other types of behaviour.

I have an early memory of being let off school for a morning to serve at the funeral of my great-aunt – Auntie Bec. On the way to the cemetery, the hearse broke down on a fairly steep hill. Eventually, with a good number of strong rugby-playing mourners pushing, the hearse got to the top of the hill, but not before I had heard one of the family members saying 'Good old Bec – stubborn to the last'.

These are two examples of how perseverance can be mixed up with attributes we might not think are quite so positive. Being stubborn, awkward difficult, or – as

my mother used to describe herself – cussed: these things are often seen as down sides to a person's character, yet it was her very cussedness that saw my mother through a life filled with the sorts of challenges that would have destroyed most people.

In Matthew 10 we read Jesus telling the twelve apostles as he sends them out: *When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell*

*you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.*

Where this translation, in common with many English translations, speaks of ‘enduring’ to the end, there are some which translate this as the one who ‘perseveres’ to the end. The Greek verb used here: ὑπομένω means not only to last or to endure but also to stay behind or to await. Jesus is not simply inviting the apostles to an endurance test, but to a game of patience. The suffering ahead is not only going to consist of active persecutions and hazards, but it will be a suffering of waiting and patience.

This should be an encouragement to those of us who, though not undergoing persecution as do some of our Christian sisters and brothers, nevertheless find ourselves wondering why things remain imperfect and –

as in the Churches Matthew was writing his gospel for – why redemption still does not seem to have arrived.

Unsurprisingly, perseverance – *perseverentia* – forms part of the medieval list of those virtues which human beings ought to be striving for. Thomas Aquinas (*Summa II IIae q.137*) argues out whether it has earned its right to be on that list, against the challenge that perseverance is no more than the requirement for the existence of all the other virtues, because a virtue cannot exist in a person unless that person actually perseveres in it. Thomas draws on the teaching of Aristotle (Ethics II,3), who says that *virtue is about the difficult and the good* to show that to persevere is actually to overcome a difficulty in order to achieve something that is good.

Thomas then goes on to point out that to persevere, both in the sense of sticking to something good, and

also in the sense of persevering to the end, is also to be in need of the grace of God. This is where careful reflection can help to distinguish between endurance through being plain contrary, and endurance for the sake of the good. Are you sticking with something just for the sake of it, or through personal pride, or to spite your opponents or critics – or are you doing it because it is the right thing?

I chose to conclude this series of Lent Addresses with the theme of perseverance because to look on the process of conversion with a realistic eye means to recognise what hard work it all is. I joked with Julie that I had given her the two ‘nice bits’ of the process in dealing with Forgiveness and Thankfulness – the recognition that one has been forgiven – and she quite appropriately reminded us that even these are not as easy or fluffy as they sound. Being reminded of Sin,

Repentance and Perseverance is up-front difficult; yet the whole process of conversion – being changed by God’s forgiving grace – is costly and painful. This is why perseverance is necessary and also why it can be problematic.

I mentioned earlier the fact that much of the teaching of Matthew’s gospel is trying to puzzle out the early Church’s conundrum of squaring the reality of their faith in Christ’s redeeming actions with the experience that redemption is very obviously not yet here, for Christ has not yet kept his promise to come again. Two thousand years later, we take that one for granted, though it must have been a real challenge to faith in those early years. A later conundrum had to do with the forgiveness of sins in Baptism. So much early teaching is about the total change worked in baptism so that the individual is from henceforth 100% part of Christ’s life, including

being totally without sin. The sins had been forgiven once; if the individual then carried on sinning, it was a sign of perdition – there was no more hope for that person.

After Christians had given over worrying about delayed redemption, this gave later generations something else to worry about right into the early Middle Ages. A realistic look at life suggested that no one was without sin, even after being baptised – so there was no hope for anyone. Bishops had to preach against a growing practice of deathbed baptism, with people leaving it as late as possible in the hope that they would arrive at the judgement without sin. Yet there is plenty of evidence in the Gospels of second chances (and even chances beyond that), so a code of penitential practice arose, involving confessions, penances aimed at not just punishing the sinner but also teaching conversion and

perseverance, and of course practices such as pilgrimages and indulgences.

The important thing to note here is something that is still – quite rightly – taught to this day: that in order to be able to embrace God's free gift of forgiveness, we need to have what is called **a firm purpose of amendment**. It is simply no good expecting to be forgiven and reconciled with no intention of doing anything about it. It is the fact that we keep on getting it wrong and needing to come back for forgiveness which gives perseverance its real and practical role in the process of conversion.

It's our hope that through this short trip through the realities of sin and forgiveness those who have listened or read will have a greater insight on the challenges involved, but also that you will be encouraged that those challenges can, with God's grace, be overcome.

Even if it is at a cost! – and the real cost of the forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation of creation with God is what we focus on each Passiontide.

So I'll end with a prayer for us all – a hymn written by that champion of good liturgy and social justice, Percy Dearmer:

*Jesus, good above all other,  
Gentle Child of gentle Mother,  
In a stable born our Brother,  
Give us grace to persevere.*

*Jesus, cradled in a manger,  
for us facing every danger,  
living as a homeless stranger,  
make we thee our King most dear.*

*Jesus, for thy people dying,  
risen Master, death defying,*

*Lord in heaven, thy grace supplying,  
keep us to thy presence near.*

*Jesus, who our sorrows bearest,  
all our thoughts and hopes thou sharest,  
thou to man the truth declarest;  
help us all thy truth to hear.*

*Lord, in all our doings guide us;  
pride and hate shall ne'er divide us;  
we'll go on with thee beside us,  
and with joy we'll persevere!*

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