

The Gift of Myrrh

Our church runs a soup kitchen as a part of our outreach. I was involved in its planning, and have been making soup (and I must say my mulligatawny is prized by all) and serving those less fortunate than myself for years. I am courteous to all, and smile as I ladle soup into their plates. Most are appreciative. But not Alf.

Alf is a street person of indeterminate age - probably about 50 - who frequents our kitchen. He is surly and angry, and can sometimes be aggressive. He certainly has no manners and never says 'thank you.' He never relates to the volunteers, except Peter, our coordinator, who seems to go out of his way to talk to him. What he gets in return is usually a series of grunts. I think it's a waste of time, but Peter still persists.

Over time, I have found myself becoming more and more angry with Alf, and it has been all I could do to smile - through gritted teeth I might add. My antipathy, I thought, was well founded. After all, Alf was impossible to stomach. The feelings became almost intolerable, to the point that I felt that I had to talk to Peter. It had become a case of either Alf goes, or I go, and I wanted Peter to understand that.

Peter listened intently to my litany of faults I saw in Alf, and how I had to say something - do something - to fix the situation. I thought he might protest. After all, I was a valuable asset to the kitchen. Instead he said, "I'm sorry you feel that way, but I think it would be wise to take time to think about any final decision. Christmas is coming up, and I know you're involved in celebrations here at the kitchen. You've been cast as one of the Kings in our nativity play, I hear."

"Yes," I said. Even that was something that stuck in my craw. Only the third king, I thought, the one who offers myrrh. Why couldn't I be the first king, the one with the gold? After all, wasn't that what I was offering here at the kitchen, the best of my abilities?

"Well," said Peter, "why don't you go home and think about this gift of myrrh. Then we'll talk about this again after Christmas."

I had no idea what he meant.

When I got home, I kept on stewing about Alf and my involvement in the kitchen, and the 'gold' of my riches freely given to these poor souls. I wasn't a street person, and couldn't identify with their life, but I could give out of the abundance of a life blessed by always having a roof over my head and food on the table. As a child, I never lacked these necessities, and felt very fortunate.

Then there was church and my prayer life - the gift of incense offered to my loving God.

But then other memories of home came crowding in. An abusive father who was impossible to please, who never seemed express his love for mum or us kids. Lonely father's days at school, when dad was nowhere to be seen. The shouting and humiliation - particularly in reference to my church going activities. 'Just like Alf,' I thought. This revelation surprised me.

What was worse was the force of the memories, which I had kept suppressed for so long, and which brought me to my knees. It was as though all my strength to serve and 'be like Jesus' had crumbled to dust. I realised that I simply couldn't serve God with such crushing pain destroying all myself

confidence, just as I couldn't deal with Alf who mirrored my pain. But I couldn't run away from him either, because I was just like him - down and out. It seemed that I had nothing of value to offer God - my gold and incense seemed irrelevant and insufficient. How could I get them back? How could I prove to God that I could still be of service?

I wept before God for a long time. After a while, though, a small thought formed itself in my head. Perhaps my very weakness was what He wanted - needed - from me. Perhaps these insights into what made Alf tick could open up ways of relating better to the folk in the soup kitchen at their level, not as someone doling out soup once a week, someone who thought they had it all together. Perhaps this could be the gift of myrrh, used for the burial of the dead. Seeing as my old way of thinking from a position of power was now dead, it started to make sense.

It still took a while to sink in, but suffice it to say I didn't leave the soup kitchen. Our Christmas celebrations were more special to me than ever that year. We involved all the street people in the nativity play, dressing them up as kings and shepherds, angels and sheep, and sang lots of carols. We ended up with fourteen shepherds, nine angels and seven kings, and guess who carried myrrh with me -yes, Alf, who, despite his many protests, joined in.

Alf seemed, for once, to enjoy himself. Mind you, it was hard to tell - he never has been one for gushing sentimentality - but this time it was OK. It didn't worry me. After all, it took me 45 years to learn the lesson of the gift of myrrh, so I couldn't expect him to change overnight. It might even take years, but what's another few years between friends?

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Lord,
it *geemg* that my woundg
are deeper than I knew.
The pain hag brought *me* to my kneeg
and I am helplegg,
unable to offer my giftg of gold and incenge,
gervice and prayer.
Only myrrh ig left.
But then you gently remind *me*
that thig gift wag offered
in your mogt helplegg and vulnerable momentg -
at birth, and in death.
Gold and incenge are not complete
without myrrh.
In itg giving,
both giver and gifted are blegged.

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