Life’s twists explored in footsteps of St Cuthbert

The Making of Us: Who We Can Become When Life Doesn’t Go As Planned, by Sheridan Voysey (Thomas Nelson, 2019) reviewed by Cath Connelly

IF AN AUTHOR IS TO SELECT a background setting for a rich conversation on vocation and giftedness, then the decision to undertake a pilgrimage in the footsteps of St Cuthbert whilst explor- ing stories of the author’s life is a winning combination. As Sheridan Voysey walks with his friend DJ from the Holy Island of Lindisfarne to Durham, they engage in gentle dialogue about the twists and turns of a life seen through the lens of discerning God’s presence.

The core message of this delightful book is that those life events that might appear as failures or distractions are actually the opportunities that God uses: “Paul the apostle stumbled onto this dynamic. Chased, flogged, imprisoned, abandoned – from the moment he fell from his horse into a life of service, souls from which he found a gap open through which God’s power could flow. He came to see weakness as integral to his mission. When trouble came to Paul, life flowed to others … What if our empty spaces became channels for God’s power, our life’s failures new lives in others?” As Voysey and DJ reflect on their own particular skills and giftedness, they see that the difficulties of this time became the fodder for God to be revealed. “Those hard times shaped my passions,” DJ says. “It’s a marvel when you think about it: all the taunts and trials of our childhood years becoming the soil from which our best selves can grow.”

Frederick Buechner has the famous quote “vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need,” with both elements of this equation needing to be balanced. Voysey explores this concept of our deepest gladness. He points out that there is not some big book in which is scribbled each of our names with the intended vocation that we must discover – a supernatural guessing game with the implied assumption that if we do not find this specific vocation that we have failed our mission. Rather, Voysey explores a life where every turn becomes the place where God meets us. From this perspective, every stepping forward is part of the living out of an aspect of feeding of the world’s greatest hunger. It is from within our particular skills and giftedness that we are thus called to live our life, not endlessly searching for the one vocation that may indeed be the calling of another.

Using St Cuthbert as his example, Voysey asks this question: “Is it not that our work won’t matter in the end. It just won’t matter the most.” What does matter is who we are in God. He writes of Cuthbert: “Books in his honour. Churches in his name. A city built on his shrine. But perhaps eternity will record Cuthbert’s legacy more like this: A mother noticed. A body held. A forehead kissed … Cuthbert’s one big thing wasn’t seeing monasteries built.

This is a gentle book, meandering across the English countryside, meandering across two lives thus far led. As a spiritual director who is often sitting in discernment with my directees, this book becomes a resource to see how God has so far been present in the director’s life, from which to ask the question “how then might God be calling you forward into this new challenge?”

If we could see the movement towards life in all its complicated turnings, then we might indeed see, as Voysey does, “it makes you wonder if … all the dead ends, wrong turns, scars, scratches, and blisters were somehow integral to the making us. Woven together under the gaze of Providence, crafting something good” that, if we were to reach in from the future to speak to our 17-year-old self, could tell that self that “he’s searching for God without realising it, and God will soon make him see. Moreover, that his life will take an unforeseen turn because of this, and this turn will be for his good. And I want to tell him that the fear he felt and the step he took in spite of it is a pattern he can expect for anything in life worth having. Face the fear. Take the risk. Don’t run away. Good things can come when we step into uncertainty.”

Made in God’s image, who are we is our very giftedness. As such, “we can face reality as it is – its weeds, rust, and flaking paint included; its failures, mistakes, and identity crises; reality in all itsordinariness. And by facing that reality for as long as it takes, we see beyond it.”

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