

Spiritual Consolation and Desolation

(adapted from “*Companions of Christ*” by Margaret Silf)

Our moods and feelings

In spite of our deep desire to build our lives on the rock of God’s will, the first indication you have that you may be walking into quicksands comes to you through the soles of your feet. You realise the danger through feeling the downward drag, the suction of the forces lurking deep in a harmless-looking beach. In the same way our inner moods and feelings can guide us to an awareness of where the quicksands may be in our living, and where we might find solid rock.

When I look back over the days with this is mind, the word that seems to fit these varying tendencies towards, or away from, the best in myself would be ‘movements’. I notice, day after day, that I am subject to inner movements that can bring out the best, or the worst, in me, and all points in between. Naturally, I wish I could always go with the positive movements, and resist the negatives. I very seriously want to find the solid rock in my life, and keep out of the quicksands, but, like St Paul, I frequently end up failing to do the good things I really, deep down, want to do, and perpetrating the very things I most wish I could avoid doing.

Ignatius would have called these movements the ‘bad spirits’ and the ‘good spirits’, the ‘demons’ and the ‘angels’. Many people today might regard them as simply the movements that go on within our psyche, prompting us variously towards what is creative (the solid rock) and what is destructive (the quicksands). Whether they are purely subjective, or whether they have an objective and universal reality way beyond our personal realm of consciousness, is a question we don’t actually have to answer, but may more wisely allow to remain in the cloud of unknowing. What really matters is not so much what we call these movements, or whether they are objective or subjective, but whether they are basically creative or destructive, and *how we choose to react to them*. Ignatius living in a cave at Manresa five hundred years ago, realised this and developed tools to examine these movements of the spirit, in order to learn from them.

A key tool is the shape of our moods and feelings. Its use might be summed up in these questions:

- What, today, has felt as though it was sucking you into the quicksands? What was pulling you ‘out of orbit’, further away from your true self? You might notice this pull, for example, in incidents or reactions that left you feeling a bit at odds with yourself, sensing that you had acted out of something less than the best in yourself. You may sense that somehow these things have depleted the store of love, hope and trust in yourself and in the world.
- What, today, has felt as though it was drawing you towards the best in yourself? Such incidents or reactions may have left you feeling a deep sense of the rightness of things. They may have helped to deepen a good relationship, or challenge something that is out of order. They will have added to the store of love, hope and trust in yourself and in the world.

The roots of the matter

But simply noticing our moods and feelings, and realising that some of them are indicating a pull away from the true alignment of our hearts, and others indicate a drawing towards it, is only the first step. We now have to discover what is the root cause of our reaction.

If I feel irritated when the woman next door starts her gossiping, or a particular topic of conversation in the family always puts me in a bad mood, what is really going on here? What is the real nature of these quicksands? Perhaps I wish that I had more time to spend just chatting. Perhaps a conversation triggers some unresolved fear or anger in me?

If I feel a deep sense of peace about a decision, even though it may have involved painful choices, what does this reveal about the nature of the solid rock in my life? There is a sense of being ‘at balance’ when we are living true to the best in ourselves. This doesn’t give us a pain exemption ticket, but it helps us begin to see the pain in the perspective of a greater good - perhaps new growth, or a deepening of love or compassion.

A ‘rubbish day’ can be an invaluable map to the terrain of our hearts. Underneath all those minor irritations or major disturbances of our inner sense of peace and wholeness lie the roots of what is impeding us on our journey towards the true life we seek in Christ. These are the warnings on

the map that tell us there are quicksands about. They teach us where we need to take avoiding action, consciously working against what tends to pull us down the destructive spiral.

And those moments, often unexpected, that lift us beyond ourselves, perhaps through the kindness of others, or through a glimpse of something so much greater than ourselves and our preoccupations, are the signs on the map that reveal where the solid rock is the true and trustworthy foundation, on which we can make our life's choices and decisions.

Ignatius speaks frequently of what he calls spiritual *consolation* and *desolation*. These terms come from the Spanish, and ultimately the Latin root, meaning 'with the sun' ('*consolation*') and 'away from the sun' ('*desolation*'), and shelves of books have been written about what they mean and how they affect us. In brief, we might say:

- In spiritual consolation, we are, as it were, facing, or focused on, the source of light, the 'otherness' of God. When our focus is on God, we are close to the rock, the solid ground of our being. We can trust our feelings to be guiding us in the true direction of our hearts.
- In spiritual desolation, we are inwardly facing away from the source of light, and focused instead on our own ego-self, our immediate preoccupations. Like the people meeting the elephant, our question is 'How does this affect me?' 'How can I make this situation/relationship/person fit into *my* system of things?' From this stance, we are in danger of wandering into the quicksands. Our feelings are not a trustworthy guide to our true direction. We are tending to re-make the world in our own image and for our own convenience, and such a world will not hold!

Ignatius reminds us that in the core of our being we are created to love, serve and be in right relationship with a centre of gravity at the heart of all creation - whom we might name 'God'.

One useful test of whether we find ourselves in consolation (on the rock) or in desolation (in the quicksands) is this:

In this particular issue, am I seeking to serve and be in right relationship with God and God's creation, or am I trying to make God and God's creation serve me? Where is the centre of gravity around which this issue is revolving for me? Where is my focus?

The pull of all the lesser attractions

But of course it's never that easy! Would that we could simply live true to the deepest desires of our hearts, and thereby consistently align our lives with God's dream for creation. Unfortunately there is no shortage of lesser attractions a long the way - or rather, they are more like distractions than attractions. They have the power to lure us off course, while we explore their cul-de-sacs, and lose track of the deeper thrust of what means most to us. Ultimately they will fail to satisfy our deeper longings. They are like Ignatius's daydreams of the great battles and lovely ladies he would win - initially enticing, but ultimately disappointing. They merely sap our energy and fail to carry us closer to our heart's true goal. They are simply *mirages*.

If, in the desert, you are making your way by the right route to your goal, and you see what appears to be an oasis, complete with palm trees, away over to the left or right of the true course, what do you do? Many a desert trekker has gone off to the 'oasis', only to find that it melts away as soon as he approaches it. By which time, of course, he has at best wasted a lot of precious time and supplies, in going off course, and at worst he has got completely lost, and is unable to retrace his steps back to the true course.

Mirages, for the spiritual trekker, are those many lesser wants and wishes, cares, preoccupations and distractions that tempt us to go after them and leave what we know what deep down is the true course of our hearts' deepest desiring. They are, of course, *illusions*. They will dissolve in our arms, like the oasis on the desert horizon, like Ignatius's unsatisfactory day-dreams. But we will have invested our energy in pursuing them, and we may have nothing left for the true heart-journey.

The fact that we believe, so strongly, in these *illusions* (or 'attachments', as they are often called in Ignatian spirituality), doesn't make them either true or real. Some things will never be true, however much we believe in them. Learning to see beyond the *illusions*, and to resist the pull of the *mirages*, is the beginning of spiritual freedom.