

Using the Gifts God Gives Us

One of the more powerful films of the 1980s was the “Elephant Man.” Filmed in black-and-white, it tells the story of Joseph Merrick, a man who was born with terrible deformities due to Proteus syndrome, which caused numerous skin deformities and abnormal bone growth in his body. He was harassed constantly by local children growing up as he tried to sell small items on the street to earn money. His home life was no better; his mother died when he was 11, and his step-mother constantly berated him, which resulted in him fleeing home. By his early 20’s he was employed in a sideshow or so-called “freak show”, and when this became outlawed in England he then went to Belgium to do the same work which resulted in his savings being taken from him by the showman. But, before he ended up in Belgium, he was given a card by Frederick Treves, a physician who would later be knighted. Leaving Belgium with his savings gone, Merrick contacted Dr. Treves, who offered him a permanent home at the hospital, where he lived life to its fullest.

What is fascinating in the story of the Elephant Man to me is that at no point do you find Merrick wallowing in self-pity. All he desires is respect and dignity, which so few give him initially. Despite this, he perseveres in his life, trying to make the most of what he has. He could speak eloquently, and could also read and write – something most people couldn’t do in the 1800s. In actual life, he apparently was able to do many things, such as collecting wildflowers while taking vacations, and embracing writing. This happened as he used the gifts he had from God, and he worked with Dr. Treves. As he began working with Dr. Treves, and people in England also found out about his story and wanted to help, he was allowed to stay on the east wing of a hospital. These were apparently the happiest years of his life, as many came to give him that which he sought – love and dignity - as he was embraced by many in England, including Queen Victoria, becoming a national celebrity of sorts.

Merrick seemingly was given very little in life, but he made the most of it.

This week’s Gospel is the parable of the prudent steward; a servant who gets in trouble for cooking the books and finds a way out. No, it’s not an endorsement of shady business dealings; rather it’s a story that invites us to use the tools God gives us, not sit around and complain we aren’t wealthy, aren’t famous, aren’t as talented as our favorite athletes, etc. We can either complain, or we can get off our duffs and start doing and acting. How to do this?

For one, we look at not what we don’t have, but what we do have. In the film, a very moving part is that Merrick is depicted as working on creating a cathedral. He can only see the tips of the church from his room in the movie, but he decides to create a beautiful model of it, which he completes right before he dies; an incredibly difficult task for someone who has limited use of their hands. He also is never depicted as having anger against God for his condition; when one of the hospital administrators dismisses him as an imbecile who cannot really be helped, he recites the 23rd Psalm. Merrick simply accepts his condition, and does all he can to glorify God, for despite his appearance, he knows that he has been given gifts to share with the world, which he does. He gives God all that he has. He’s clever in the sense that he sees what matters most – living a life of love – and he uses what he has to do just that. He might not seem to have much,

but he does so much with what he's got. Sometimes when we complain or get down on ourselves, we can list out some of our talents and gifts and may be surprised at what we ind.

We also ask ourselves, how can I use the gifts God has given me to glorify Him, to make this world a more better place? Merrick inspired people to look past his outer image to the beautiful soul within, and reminded people of the beauty of the human person. Jesus reminds us: "no servant can serve two masters." We strive to always keep God front and center, and to use our gifts for Him, not so we can just get praise or build up our bank accounts or egos. John Paul II often quoted *Gaudium et Spes*, a Vatican II document, which stated: "Man cannot fully find himself, except through a sincere gift of himself." That's the real way to happiness. As I look at my life, at various points I thought "if only I had this" I'd be happy. Now, I'm at a point where there are still things I get excited about, like a new photography gadget, winning in fantasy football, (or seeing my favorite football team beat a certain team from Green Bay like last weekend) or going on a vacation, but I'm quite aware that these things do not ultimately fulfill. Life indeed has it's joys and enjoyable moments, but it can be easy to live for oneself only. We have to keep our eyes fixed on God, and use our talents for His glory. Discipleship is serious business. There is no room for a part-time follower of Christ. The steward realizes he needs to save himself from getting fired, and nothing is getting in the way of him achieving that goal. He's a man who is focused and determined. You and I are to have that same focus by keeping our eyes fixed on heaven.

We also look at how to cooperate with others. Only as a team and working together can we make things thrive; this goes for our families, our parish, our community, nation and world. Merrick had gifts; Dr. Treves helped him to find them. Let us never forget we are many parts but one body, and not get into petty competitions with one another, but work together to make this a better world. A hundred years ago a man who seemingly had everything going against him used what he was given to do incredible things, and a doctor who could have ignored the needs of a fellow human being and still been seen as an incredible success in the eyes of his colleagues and the public decided to help someone society would chose to ignore. And together, they used their talents to make not only themselves better people, but the world a better place as attitudes began to change in how people with disabilities were looked at.

Lastly, we have balance. Jesus does not say "you cannot *have* both God and mammon," rather He says "you cannot *serve* both God and mammon." Like the steward who was given much from his master and misused what he was given, we too are given much from our Father and may misuse it. Hopefully we use daily all that God gives us. Our God wants us to live a life of fullness and help others to do the same.

Sometimes we are tempted to escape from the world, or to give up on it when we see the poor choices others make, or to think "every man for himself." Jesus, though, has shown us the better way: living in the world by being beacons of light to set it aflame, one soul at a time. Hopefully we are never afraid to look into the mirror each morning and see not who we aren't, but who we are: children of a loving God who have so much talent inside of ourselves to truly make this world a better place, if only we'd unlock the grace God has given us. May we never be afraid to do just that, and help one another unlock the key by doing the same.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul