

Dear Friends,

One of the most impressive conversion stories is that of St. Ignatius of Loyola. When his life was turned inside out by his encounter with the living Christ, his first desire was to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The account goes that he set off just as he was, with only the clothes he stood up in, no provisions, no money, trusting in God to get him there and back. And so somehow it happened.

If I were going to make a journey like that I would want everything to be well worked out in advance, flight booked, hotels arranged, credit cards in order, plenty of spare currency, suitcase packed with everything I might need - even though I know most of it I will probably never use. Some people like things to be clear cut and definite, well worked out, others are happy to take pot luck and take things as they come. It is a difference of temperament, and we cannot say that one way is better than another - they are simply different - though sometimes we might wish we were of the other type. People who like things thoroughly worked out might occasionally wish they could be more free and easy.

Human beings are infinitely varied - in age, size, colouring, shape, appearance, and so on. There are also many varieties of temperament or prevailing attitudes, and there are several models or ways of understanding and categorising these varieties. One such you may have come across is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which analyses differences in temperament according to how we relate to the world at large. Do we, for instance, draw mainly on our inner resources, or do we need lots of contact with other people?

When I first came across the Myers-Briggs I reacted against it, and resented the idea that human beings could be put into pre-packaged categories, but that was before I really knew anything about it. When I did start to work with it, I came to see that there is a lot of truth here, and maybe we resent these systems because they tell us more than we would care to know about ourselves.

The same may be true of the other system popular today, the Enneagram. This identifies types of personality according to our dominant compulsion. Some people are driven to want to be in control, others to be helpful, others to construct a romantic image of themselves and how they are. There are 9 basic types in the Enneagram on these lines.

These and other ways of understanding the varieties of human personality will say that our character is formed at quite an early stage in our life and that there is nothing much we can do about it. We cannot become another type. What we can do is accept the truth about ourselves and rejoice in its good points, because every type does have its positive as well as its negative side, and we can contribute the good side to whatever we are engaged in. At the same time we can make allowances for the negative element and try to work with it, even take on some of the opposite characteristics. If you are so formed that you cannot abide loose ends, that is good and important and useful to others, but you might try the experiment occasionally of letting go of your need to have everything in order and let yourself be content with a little messiness. It could be liberating to take that risk!

From the point of view of our Christian faith, we are, each of us, as God made us to be. If we

can accept in faith that we are as God made us, then we can rejoice in what is good in our make-up and determine to contribute that to the greater good of the Church and indeed of our world. If there are aspects of us that we do not like, we can ask God to help us live with that and channel the negative side also into doing what he calls us to do.

Last week saw the feast of two of the greatest saints, Peter and Paul, who were in their different ways called to particular ministries in the service of God. Peter, the first bishop of Rome, is the rock on which the structure of the Church was built, the one who keeps the institution together - a vital and necessary work, because if everything is free-floating and there are no structures, chaos can easily result. Paul, by contrast, was the adventurous missionary, who went out beyond the boundaries of the first Christian community, which was entirely Jewish, to bring the faith to the Gentile world and so in time to all mankind. It would have been tempting to say, 'No, we are fine as we are, we are content with what we know. Let's stay as we are and not take the risk of changing.' But if that attitude had been followed, the infant Church would have been stifled at birth and today it would be no more than a footnote in the history of Middle Eastern religions.

I suspect this standard picture of Peter and Paul is not quite the full story about them. We really know very little about their characters, what sort of people they were. We might well think of categorising them in terms of the MBTI or Enneagram or some other model, according to the roles they played. There may be some point in that, but more important is to rejoice at what they individually gave to the building-up of the Church, and determine to give whatever we are and have to that work in our own day. Each of us is called to play a unique personal part in the life of the Church, and God has made each one of us as we are to be able to play that part.

I think we need to acknowledge that there are often tensions between different personality types. In particular, it is fatally easy to allow a liking for structures to become a devotion to the institution for its own sake, and forget what it is really for. The Church is not there just to make us feel safe, however cosy and pleasing that may be. It exists to make God known in the world, and so we need the adventurous types who are willing to break out of the accepted moulds and open things up in new ways to draw others to the newness of God. They can be uncomfortable and disturbing to live with, but the institution needs them as much as it needs the conscientious bureaucrats. This is the prophetic mode which we see in Jesus himself, who says to us in this Sunday's Gospel that the prophet is not always honoured in his own country. There are certainly many instances of that in our history: prophetic figures who were ignored, despised, marginalised, put in prison or even sometimes put to death for daring to be true to their God-given mission - Jeremiah, Paul, John of the Cross among them. It is salutary and humbling to recall that however despised they may have been at first, in the end their vision was vindicated and recognised by the Church at large.

As best we can, therefore, let us give thanks for the varieties of human giftedness and recognise that every type has its role to play, each one vital and indispensable in its way, even those whom we find it hard to live with!

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.