

On Vulnerability

As I have explored elsewhere (1) we live in an individualistic culture that assumes autonomy as our natural condition, to be valued above all else. This is our contextual reality. It tells us that from time to time in life – episodically - we will need to lean on others. If we are physically incapacitated or mentally unwell, for instance, or we lose a job and seek out the support of others to make ends meet. These things are constructed as necessarily temporary. We will ‘get back on our feet’. We will ‘recover’. We will get better. The dependency of childhood is mere preparation for the autonomy of adulthood, and our education focuses on how we will negotiate that forthcoming reality. The frailty that comes with old age is something we deal with badly, for we see no cultural purpose in it.

The gospel requires that we reverse this understanding; that we see vulnerability as our contextual reality. We are other-dependent for our physical and emotional needs, for our sense of ourselves – our identity, our self-perception. Episodically we may experience a sense of self-sufficiency, but this is a culturally generated, economically-driven illusion. In reality we are hurt and broken by others, and held up by them. Others make us anxious and afraid, but also enable us to flourish. Speaking into this reality is the voice of God, exhorting us to ‘fear not’. We are treasure. We are prized. We are cherished. We are loved. Loneliness and isolation are all around us in our contextual idolisation of autonomy and independence. We need a new language of kindness and acceptance – a still small voice that can silence the cultural message that we are not good enough, haven’t achieved enough, haven’t enough to show for our lives, that we are not enough. Contextual strength and episodic vulnerability breeds secrecy, stigma and shame. Contextual vulnerability and episodic strength breeds compassion and a relinquishing of the will to control.