



Sam: This is really hard!                      Coach. Very hard.

Sam gets enough courage to try, and he does the back dive. After he gets out of the water, he is beaming and exclaims:

Sam: I did it!                                      Coach: Yes, you did it!

After practicing a few more times, Sam (says proudly): I can be a showoff! Coach: Yes you can. The coach just agreed with him all the time. He didn't say, "No it's not hard, don't be silly." After the dive, he emphasised "Yes, Sam, you did it." From his experience Sam feels successful, concluding for himself in his own mind, that because he did something that was in his estimation, "scary" and "hard" that he is "terrific!" The coach didn't say "Terrific!" Sam says it to himself "I am terrific!"

The Christian encouragement that Paul emphasises so much is not particularly about making people feel terrific but it is about making them feel that, through their faith they can make a difference to people and they can demonstrate their faith in many ways. That may well be hard, even scary! Like Sam, it may well take us out of our comfort zone. Christian encouragement, as with any encouragement, fosters independence, supports those that try, emphasises real and specific contributions and focuses on joy and effort. And Paul realised that was so important to the early Church. Without encouragement people feel unloved, unimportant, useless, forgotten. Paul knew that the early Christians in Thessalonica, Ephesus and Corinth, for example, were in need of grace-filled reminders, so he called on them to encourage each other every day. Christian encouragement isn't focused on complementing someone's clothes or telling them how good their homemade cakes taste, important as this encouragement is. Paul refers to Christian encouragement - shared with the hope that it will lift someone's heart toward God. In the New Testament Letters the main word translated as 'encouragement' is used 80 times. Paul wanted it to be THE most practical way that Christians express love to one another. He knew that the early Christians were living under intense pressure—not just normal pressures of everyday life but also in serving Christ in an environment which was openly hostile. Through this encouragement, Paul wanted to communicate God's truth in ways that personally strengthened others to follow God's ways - that is how the Church survived and then flourished.

Jesus, too, has a unique way of seeing value and potential in people that they cannot see for themselves. In John's Gospel Andrew, Peter's brother, tells his brother that he has found the Messiah and he brings him to Jesus. We are told that "Jesus looked at him," but John doesn't use the normal verb for "look" here. He uses a word that means "gaze intently into." Jesus peers into Peter's inner being, as it were, sizes him up—and then says: "You are Simon son of John; you shall be called Peter, 'the Rock.'" Jesus won Peter's heart. He knew the person that Peter had the potential to become and was determined to encourage him to be so. We all would like a relationship with someone who knows our worst flaws and weaknesses, but who loves us as we are and, more importantly, sees our potential and encourages us to use it. No one else does this like Jesus. Encouragement was at the centre of Jesus' relationship with other people and it is through his thoughts, words and actions that he revealed that people mattered to him. To him it WAS all about inclusiveness, appreciation and acceptance - today, not sometime soon when it feels right.

The New Testament reveals that encouragement was a regular part of the early church's life. They shared words of scripture with each other to spur each other on in faith, hope, joy, perseverance and the certainty of Christ's return. Paul says, to the Thessalonians that we 'are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness.' While we wait for 'the day of the Lord that will come like a thief in the night,' we should get on encouraging one another. People often only connect God's Holy Spirit with big signs, wonders and miracles. But when we truly encourage one another, we show God's Holy Spirit working in us and through us, in everything that we do, every day.

A true story that I have used a few times in sermons at Christmas Midnight Mass involves a story of a young orphan boy, living in the orphanage. For the first time he was to spend Christmas away from the orphanage. On arriving at the home where he was to spend Christmas he was so scared he rushed into the bedroom and crawled under the bed. He refused to move however much the family he was staying with called, pleaded, encouraged him to come out and join them. The mum could have, of course, got hold of him and dragged him out but that wasn't her way. She wanted the boy to feel safe enough to come out from under the bed himself. After a while and in some desperation, Mum laid down flat on the floor and squeezed under the bed, so she could lay alongside the frightened boy. She lay there holding his hand. That was enough. The boy knew that this mum could and would meet him at his level and lie beside him, down there, underneath the bed. With that he came out from under the bed and joined the family for Christmas.

I have used this story at Christmas because I believe that the birth of baby Jesus shows us that God came into our world to live alongside of us. Through the Holy Spirit, he remains by our side. When Jesus called the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, He is saying that the Holy Spirit is the one who comes alongside us, stands with us, and helps us to build ourselves up and move on. That's what encouragement does. That, Paul says, is what we should be offering to each other every day.

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