

Negotiating Potholes

I came across J R Eberhardt's poem 'The Road' (April 2017) the other day:

I am on a bus.
There are lots of potholes
on the street. I can't see
the potholes but I can feel them when the Bus shakes.
It shakes and shakes
and I feel sick and I want to
yell at the driver to drive better but it's not the driver's fault
that there are potholes
on the street.

According to the 2017 Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance Survey it would cost £12.6 billion and take 14 years to fix the current backlog of pothole repairs. Surrey has been named the worst county in the UK for the most reports of 'current' (not historic) potholes, followed closely by Hampshire and Kent. National Pothole Day on the 16th January is gaining in status year on year, created to spread awareness of the problems of the millions of potholes plaguing Britain's roads. As of last year, there were over 12,000 miles of potholes across the UK, enough to spread halfway across the world. Apparently rutted streets are so commonplace in New Orleans, USA, that residents have taken some extreme measures to draw attention to particular potholes. There was the birthday party in New Orleans East for a 5-foot-wide pothole on Cannes Street. They had cake, balloons and a "Happy Birthday, Pothole" sign. Then there was the couple from the Broadmoor District of New Orleans who turned a 2-foot-deep, 8-foot-wide pothole into the "Broadmoor Green Space Migratory Bird Refuge and Wetlands Reclamation Project," decorated with plastic flamingos and toy boats. Potholes are a fact of life everywhere – all over the world. I know, too, that all is relative – the roads in many parts of Africa, I gather, are more hole than tarmac, more mud than concrete. Potholes are a fact of everyday travel.

We have all experienced potholes in the road of life, too, that either slow us down, delay our journey or maybe totally disrupt it. Potholes keep us from moving forward. They can be small or immense, shallow or deep. They can persist and often multiply. I can relate well to Ryan SparKticas's poem, Potholes:

*I think I fell
Into the hole I'd dug
Trying to fill the one I'd just
Climbed out of..* (January 2016)

And so those potholes in our own life come, they go or they stay. We have to put up with them and deal with them but maybe if we let them, they can open our eyes to see the real Jesus. One of the things I have learned from my faith journey is that God is more concerned with my character than my comfort. Potholes are not comfortable as anyone who drives a car or rides on a bus will know and as Ryan SparKticas' poem tells us, as we try to avoid some or fill some in we fall into others. Growth in our character, our determination and commitment and our faith takes place in a time of tension, of pressure and of pain and suffering. Perhaps we need to emphasise that to ourselves. If we live in an equilibrium where everything stays the same, there is no motivation for growth or change and there will be NO growth or change.

One of the greatest challenges, for us, is to overcome spiritual inertia - standing still spiritually and being comfortable where we are. Potholes in life often put us off balance and cause us to change direction; they can be a catalyst for us. If there is no pothole, we will resist change. Our personal potholes challenge us and hopefully change us to become more like Jesus as we embrace His call, His call to the cross in our lives. That is why the cross is central to the journey of our faith. Each of us is aware of what our potholes are and that is how potholes CAN have their positive side!

In John's Gospel 6:60, many of Jesus' followers cry out, "This is a hard teaching, who will accept it?" and they stop following him." Jesus turns to his disciples and says "You do not want to leave me too, do you?" If this is what we have to look forward to, then why follow Jesus? But Paul answers this in his Letter to the Philippians: "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead." There comes a point in time when all of us have to wrestle with the real call of Jesus. We realize Jesus doesn't want a part of our life, He wants to BE our life. He wants everything: our time, gifts and treasures. Jesus calls us beyond our comfort zone not to serve our needs but the needs of other people.

Another blight on our road journeys, however short or long they are, are those temporary and ever mobile roadworks, there to fill in the potholes and patch the road surface. In many ways roadworks are an interesting and relevant analogy of our own journey of faith. God accepts us where we are but wants us to become more like Jesus. For most of us, that involves serious roadworks. Roadworks are usually a three step process: tearing up the old surface, preparing the subsurface and then constructing the new. Is that not what God wants to do in us? In our journey of faith, he wants us to sort out the old which is a challenging, often painful process in itself. In our entrenched ways we have grown comfortable with the way things are, without thinking whether they balance with what God wants for us. The second process really does involve God in below the surface work. It is all about realigning our heart and mind with God's – hard work when it involves dealing with past actions, thoughts, prejudices and practices. The third thing that God wants is for us to instill new attitudes and behaviours which reflect those of Jesus. This may well involve new eyes through which to see the world, and to see it from a different perspective entirely.

With our world demanding instant cash, credit, instant food and drink, instant news, instant communications, instant heat, instant answers, it is right to remind ourselves that there is no instant Christian character, lifestyle and maturity and that attempts to find short cuts to reach these will more often than not lead to failure. We should know that it takes a lifetime. Jesus was tempted to take short cuts but in the end he went the long way round, past Galilee and Judea, past the Jerusalem Upper Room and Gethsemane, past the high priest's palace and Pilate's court by the way of the cross to Joseph's tomb. God surely does an infinitely bigger thing for us than giving us a short cut through our difficulties and instant solutions to our problems when he makes us wise and strong enough to help us find our way through these things. As we negotiate the corners and potholes in our life it is Jesus who is constantly asking us, over and over again, to keep on giving up parts of ourselves to follow him.

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