

THE GENTLE POWERLESS POWER OF GOD

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Daniel Berrigan was once asked to give a conference at a university gathering. The topic given him was something to the effect of “God’s Presence in Today’s World”. His talk, I suspect, surprised a number of people in his audience, both in brevity and content.

He simply told the audience how he, working in a hospice for the terminally ill, goes each week to spend some time sitting by the bed of a young boy who is totally incapacitated, physically and mentally.

The young boy can only lie there. He cannot speak or communicate with his body nor in any other way, it would seem, express himself to those who come into his room. He lies mute, helpless, by all outward appearance cut off from any possible communication.

Berrigan then described how he goes regularly to sit by this young boy’s bed to try to hear what he is saying in his silence and helplessness.

After sharing this, Berrigan added a further point: The way this young man lies in our world, silent and helpless, is the way God lies in our world. To hear what God is saying we must learn to hear what this young boy is saying.

This is an extremely useful image in helping us understand how the power of God manifests itself in our world. God’s power is in the world like that young boy. It does not overpower with muscle, or attractiveness, or brilliance, or grace, as does the speed and muscle of an Olympic athlete, the physical beauty of a young film star, or the gifted speech or rhetoric of the brilliant orator or author.

These latter things—muscle, swiftness, beauty, brilliance, grace—do reflect God’s glory, but they are not the primary way God shows power in this world. No. God’s power in the world has a very different look and a very different feel to it.

What does God’s power look like? How does it feel to feel as God must often feel in this world?

If you have ever been overpowered physically and been helpless in that, if you have ever been hit or slapped by someone and been powerless to defend yourself or fight back, then you have felt how God is in this world.

If you have ever dreamed a dream and found that every effort you made was hopeless and that your dream could never be realised, if you have cried tears and felt shame at your own inadequacy, then you have felt how God is in this world.

If you have ever been sick and there was no doctor or medicine that could cure you, if you have ever felt the mortality of your own body and been hopeless at its weakness, then you have felt how God is in the world.

If you have ever been shamed in your enthusiasm and not given a chance to explain yourself, if you have ever been cursed for your goodness by people who misunderstood you and were powerless to make them see things in your way, then you have felt how God is in this world.

If you have ever tried to make yourself attractive to someone and were incapable of it, if you have ever loved someone and wanted desperately to somehow make him or her notice you and found yourself hopelessly unable to do so, then you have felt how God is in this world.

If you have ever felt yourself ageing and losing both the health and tautness of a young body and the opportunities that come with that and been powerless to turn back the clock, if you have ever felt the world slipping away from you as you grow older and ever more marginalised, then you have felt how God is in this world.

And if you have ever felt like a minority of one before the group hysteria of a crowd gone mad, if you have ever felt, first-hand, the sick evil of a gang rape, then you have felt how God is in this world . . . and how Jesus felt on Good Friday.

God never overpowers. God's power is never the power of a muscle, a speed, a physical attractiveness, a brilliance or a grace which (as the contemporary expression has it) blows you away and makes you say: "Yes, there is a God!" The world's power tries to work that way.

God's power though is more muted, more helpless, more shamed and more marginalised. But it lies at a deeper level, at the ultimate base of things, and will, in the end, gently have the final say.

Used with permission of the author, Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser. Currently, Father Rolheiser is serving as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas. He can be contacted through his website, www.ronrolheiser.com. www.facebook.com/ronrolheiser.