

## What matters most

by A. Soule

There is this rather a deeply haunting story by Tolstoy which I happened to re-read recently. This is not to say that I had forgotten the tale completely as I doubt anyone who reads it once could wipe it away clean from their minds. The details can get blurred with time, but in the main this is one of those stories which sticks with you. When I first read it, some years ago, I thought it morbid but on reading it now again, I think it shines a light on what really matters in life or what we ought to live by. The story itself is titled 'What men live by'.

The story goes that a poor shoemaker despairing of his debt goes out on a cold evening, gets drunk and on his way back home sees a naked man lying by the lonely road shivering in cold. He asks him who he was; the pitiable naked man could only say his name was Michael and that God had punished him. The shoemaker takes pity on him, covers him with his warm coat and takes him home. As expected, his wife shouts at him for coming home drunk and for bringing home another mouth to feed. But later that evening, looking at the stranger closely she feels pity for him and offers him some food. Michael (the stranger) smiles for the first time then.

Time goes by, the shoemaker puts a condition of his stay that he work with him in shoe making. Once an angry rich man comes in with an expensive roll of leather ordering the shoemaker to make expensive shoes for him with that. The shoemaker assures him that the shoes would be ready, but all the while the shoemaker was talking to the man, Michael seemed to fix his gaze beyond the door way where the rich man stood, as if in recognition of someone, and smiles for the second time. Instead of making the kind of shoes demanded by the rich man, Michael quietly went about using the expensive leather to make a pair of soft slippers instead.

The shoemaker got very angry with Michael, worrying that he had wasted the expensive leather but shortly after there was a knock on the door. The rich man's servant came to inform them that his master had died due to an accident, and that they would now only need soft slippers for the body (as was customary in Russia then). Michael had already made those slippers. The shoemaker was puzzled by all this, but kept it to himself.

Some years go by and then one day a middle aged woman comes in accompanied by two young girls one of whom had a severe disability in one leg - asking for shoes to be made for them. Michael takes shoe measurements of the girls and at that point the shoemaker's wife asks the woman if the girls were her own daughters, to which she replies that they weren't, but she had brought the two girls up as her own after their mother had died suddenly crushing one of the girl's leg at her deathbed. Michael smiled again - and this was the third time he had smiled. But the shoemaker saw something else apart from the smile on Michael's face, he didn't know what to make of it; he saw a kind of a halo forming around Michael.

Michael explained that he was actually an angel who was tasked to take away a woman's life so she could pass on to the next life. However, he had allowed the woman to live because she begged that she must take care of her children for no one other than their mother could care for them. However, he was punished for his

disobedience and commanded that he must find the answers to three questions in order to be an angel again: *What dwells in man?*, *What is not given to man?*, and *What do men live by?*

He learned the answer to the first question when the shoemaker's wife felt pity for him, thus smiling and realizing that what dwells in man is 'love'. The answer to the second question came to him when he realized that the angel of death was looming over a nobleman who was making preparations for a year though he would not live. Michael smiled, realizing that what is not given to man is 'to know his own needs'. The answer to the third question came when he saw the woman with the two girls, and smiled the third time when he realised that men live not by care for themselves but by love, and concluded, that "he who has love, is in God, and God is in him, for God is love." When Michael finished wings appeared on his back and he rose to return to heaven.

Now this is purely a work of fiction from one of the greatest writers of all time, who incidentally also spent a lot of time pondering on what Jesus actually taught. But not many can dispute that there is truth in the fact that love, whether we understand the workings of it or not, is central to our lives. There is a lot already written about love and how it makes the world go around, but this story is different - it is about how we are essentially wired, taking into account how very fragile our existence is. It speaks volumes in times of uncertainty - such as what we are going through now.

Understanding what makes us tick is really quite complicated, especially if you consider recent advances in psychology - the writings of Freud, Jung and many others; the solution is often summed up as 'finding yourself', 'being true to yourself'. Whilst there is a lot of value in trying to know oneself, I don't think knowing oneself, as fully as one can, is the answer to what life is all about. Psychiatry and counselling can help you know yourself and come to terms with what happens in your life, but that only seems like half the answer. Surely our journey as Christians doesn't stop at just getting an understanding of ourselves.

Coming back to Tolstoy's story, despite a lot of debate about the writer's intention, the message that comes across for most people, loud and clear, is that love for others is at the root of human happiness, and that is how we are made. But all this can sound quite glib - much easily written about than actually understood in the complexity of every day life. All of us through the various stages of our lives undertake a journey; to find ourselves first, and then ourselves in relation to others. In all probability it takes a life time to understand what really matters to us. It is not surprising then that most death-bed accounts talk about the person dying making sure near and dear know how much he or she loves them.

There are still though many hard questions about death and suffering in the world, especially in the face of thousands already being killed by this pandemic in just two months. We are all seeking some rationale to why such horrifying things happen, so often across history. What resonated with me in this context was an article I read fairly recently in the New York Times (by Ross Douthat), which pointed out that whilst it was easy to presume the messages God was sending the world through suffering, natural disasters and pandemics; most ordinary Christians the writer knew stay away from attempting to answer the "why?" question - they point to Job whose friends were rebuked by God for trying to do precisely that.

Now this is not to say there aren't any theological answers to the conundrum of suffering; in fact there are a range of answers given by eminent theologians across the centuries, but none of them deny the reality of suffering. Suffering comes to all, Christians or not, but as Christians we believe God not only entered a world filled with suffering but also that through the incarnation in Jesus sided with those who suffer and suffered himself. The reality of lives being lost is written large across our TV screens on a daily basis these days - with pictures of family members grieving and lamenting their loss. Like everything in life, there is a time for joy and a time for lamentation. There were times when Jesus also grew weary and grieved.

Lamenting in itself is a very natural response; and there is no explaining it away - it hits people hard. It is but important to understand that lamenting or grieving at its core is an acknowledgment of love for the other - an acknowledgment that the thread of love is at the root of our existence, which ends not just with us, but also links us to God who in Jesus lived in solidarity with our pain.