

What are the roots that clutch?

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It is often said that poetry can articulate truths hidden deep in our subconscious. This is particularly true in the case of TS Eliot's 'The Wasteland' which touched the general mood of the western world at the end of the Great War. It speaks of a time in our history when not many families were left untouched by grief and despair. A great many families then had to deal with deaths in their immediate family - of their husband, father, brother, a loved one or someone they knew.

The old optimism of the nineteenth century that things in the end would turn out well had crumbled. Many came to accept that the governing principle of life was plain absurdity- after all nothing else then made sense. The poem in describing the dark mood of those times poses a deeply existential question, set out in Section 1 of the poem as:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?

Leaving aside the permutations of poetic interpretations with what follows next in the poem; the question as it stands is pretty direct, what is it that holds us together? How are we to live having seen death and destruction around us?

The poem was written in 1922, and despite the decades which followed, the question still haunts us. We still seek assurance of having something really strong and abiding to hold on to, something which can sustain us - renew us.

At the time when the poem was published, most people felt they had had a belly full of simplistic platitudes, which seemed to fall far short of what they were actually going through. What was needed then and even now perhaps, is a basic acknowledgment that there are no straightforward answers as to why despair and grief accompany life. How we feel about things, cannot simply be brushed aside as not being material fact. For in the end what we are left with are our feelings, they are the experience of reality for us. We are what we are shaped by our doubts, insecurities and belief.

It is also fair to say that how we act and decide in life is in a large measure guided by what we believe in. A life based in the acknowledgment of our inadequacy, God's abiding love for us and a sense of duty to care for fellow beings can land us in a different place to where we might end up in a life dictated by anxiety and doubt.

The first port of call for many of us in understanding what life is all about is in our relationships with each other, within families and friends, who often hold a mirror to us to see how we really are. But there are times when the glass cracks; friends and family who you expect support from let you down.

A rather haunting example of this is described in a beautifully written poem by Thomas Hood, called the 'Bridge of Sighs'. A young woman turned out by her parents, for some misdemeanor in their eyes (possible pregnancy), throws herself down Waterloo bridge and dies. As she stood near the bridge trying to decide what to do

next, there was no one there to hold her hand, to talk to her, bring her into shelter and warmth; all she had in her mind were the harsh words spoken to her by her family. The stanzas below from the poem are particularly heart wrenching:

*Alas! for the rarity
Of Christian charity
Under the sun!
O, it was pitiful!
Near a whole city full,
Home she had none.*

*Sisterly, brotherly,
Fatherly, motherly
Feelings had changed:
Love, by harsh evidence,
Thrown from its eminence;
Even God's providence
Seeming estranged.*

There was deep hurt somewhere, and a complete absence of those she expected to stand by her or understand her. Everything around her seemed to say 'no one cares'.

Christian charity which the poet refers to would surely mean more than just slipping a fiver in her lap and quickly walking on. It is the ability to stand alongside the vulnerable, having the patience to listen and do all one can to help. But it needn't be large gestures which are always needed. Very often what's needed is just standing alongside the person and a kind word. After all, there is something more than just two square meals a day which keeps us ticking along.

Words can give us most joy but they can also be a cause of great sorrow. Something said or unsaid can make all the difference at times. The feeling that someone cares is what we hold on to. A world of indifference and apathy is certainly far from what Christianity is about.

Note; The full poem can be accessed online at this link:

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-bridge-of-sighs/>