

Column

“Fill my cup, Lord,” begins a Christian song. As the lyrics make clear, what we humans need most is God’s satisfying grace. It is possible to have houses and lands, cars and boats, things and more things, and be miserable, and such is the case with many in our world today.

But it is not only our cups that need to be filled, but also our ‘wells’. I am thinking of the wells of minds and hearts. If these are dry, we shall have nothing to draw out in the day of trouble. We shall find ourselves parched and dry and without resources in evil days.

Such was not the case with Terry Waite. While serving as envoy for the Archbishop of Canterbury, he was arrested and held hostage in Lebanon for nearly five years. From 1987 to 1991, he was held in solitary confinement and allowed to speak to no one save his interrogators.

In his own words: “I was brought up in a small English village. Because I was keen on music and singing, I joined the church choir and so became a regular attender at church. I’m very grateful for the background that gave me. It gave me an appreciation and a love of music, which has lasted across life. It gave me a love of language because in those days we used the Book of Common Prayer, which has marvelous, rhythmic language. And it helped me with some fundamental understandings.

“When I was young, unconsciously I had committed [the texts found in the Prayer Book] to memory. There were the Psalms and the services of the Church and the prayers of the Church.

So, I could say, for example, which I did, a simple Collect, like ‘Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all the perils and dangers of this night.’ A very simple prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, but a prayer that has great meaning

when you are in the dark and when you are afraid and when you are alone. And not only that, that language has a rhythm and harmony.

“One of the things one is attempting to do in a situation like that is to maintain that inner harmony, or to develop that inner harmony, to stop yourself from fragmenting within. And good language, like good music, has the capacity to breathe harmony into the soul.”

Recently, I shared the story of Terry Waite with a young man incarcerated in a county jail about three hours from here. By any fair standards, he is there unfairly, a victim of a flawed and broken system. Nevertheless, that is where he finds himself. His situation is not identical with Mr. Waite's, but at points has similarities. For months, he and others in a six-storied concrete structure have not seen the sunlight. No outdoor yard is provided, and as far as I could tell when I visited the place last Friday, no windows.

Unlike Mr. Waite, however, he is able to have video calls and to receive paperback books from such sources as Amazon. Even without these, because he was well instructed as a child, he has the old hymns of the church and verses of scripture etched in his memory and is able to recall them during the long nights in that dark and hideous place. There is water in his well.

His experience, no less than that of Mr. Waite's, reminds us to fill our wells and keep filling them for we never know when that water shall be needed. Our part in filling them is focusing on good and noble things and by staying away from those that are tawdry, sorted and superficial.

The Apostle Paul's admonition found in Philippians 4:8 has never been more needed: “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

Fill my cup, Lord, but also my well!

O LORD, from whom all good things do come; Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that are good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Collect, Fifth Sunday after Easter, Book of Common Prayer)

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