

The Power of Small

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Back when I decided to major in English in college, I had a hard and fast rule: no courses featuring Western literature from the 20th century. From a very young age, I was put off by how much European and American "modern" literature, art and music seemed to glorify ugliness, cruelty or meaninglessness. I was unmoved and unimpressed by expressions that neither provided inspiration nor (in many cases) required any talent. My thought at the time was that life was too short to fill one's life with pointless darkness.

Those early impressions have only been reinforced in the years since. I've tended to steer clear of what I disliked back then, in favor of history, non-Western literature, science fiction or fantasy. But I am reading a best-selling fiction novel at the moment. And while I wouldn't describe it as post-modern or nihilist, it has made another theme of contemporary literature stand out for me. Specifically, I'm astonished at the extent to which the drama in these stories could be completely averted by the *tiniest* bit of honesty, kindness, compassion or basic common sense.

I'm not referring to huge, cataclysmic events, by the way, but to the small, everyday interactions which individually don't mean much, but which, over time, add up to a great deal. And which, by virtue of their simplicity and mundanity, would require precious little effort to do correctly at the time they happen.

Yes, I realize that people do act like that, but I can't enjoy it when I'm reading it. I find myself shaking my head, thinking, "Dear God, why would you say such a hurtful thing?" or "Please don't do that" or "For heaven's sake, just tell him the truth."

It struck me that it is perfectly in keeping with the spirit of the Christmas season to recognize the enormous impact of small things.

At Christmas Eve Mass this past Sunday, the priest spoke of the ironic circumstances of Jesus Christ's arrival on earth: to come as a baby, born to the poorest of parents, in a backwater town of an occupied territory at the outskirts of the Roman Empire. No one -- least of all the evil one whom Christ came to defeat -- would expect God himself to arrive in such an ignoble and powerless state. But, the homilist continued, God did not manifest in this way as some wily deception, but because this incarnation as a helpless human infant was the essence of God's love: utterly dependent upon human response.

Writers often comment how remarkable it is that Christ -- and through him, Christianity -- transformed the world in spite of the implausible circumstances of his brief, impoverished life (not to mention his ignominious death by execution). But it makes more sense to conclude that he chose his manner of life on earth because this is precisely what would achieve the objectives he sought.

When human beings consider "power," we tend to mean the ability to *force* people to do what we would like them to or think they should. By that calculus, the more force one can apply to the largest number of people, the more power one has, and the more successful one will be. We therefore think of earthly kings, vast bureaucracies or dictators as "powerful." It is almost incomprehensible, therefore, that the Almighty -- who could, one presumes, have arrived in a blaze of glory and simply ordered everyone on earth to do as he commanded -- did nothing of the sort.

Christ forced no one to do anything. Instead, his "power," as it were, was displayed in his routine, daily interactions with those nearest to him. He never traveled more than a few miles from his home. Perhaps a few thousand people ever heard him speak. And his life was brief, even by the standards of his day. But those whom he touched were inspired to reach out to others in a similar fashion (and often at great personal expense, including loss of their own lives). Thus did the thoughts and words of one seemingly powerless man spread around the world.

There lies the common takeaway in both the tragedy of the contemporary novel and the triumph of Jesus Christ. For good or for ill, true "power" lies in the smallest of things. The choices we make in the most mundane matters of our day-to-day existence have greater significance than we know (something that often only becomes clear when we choose poorly). If we choose to act with kindness, honesty and (please God) just a little self-restraint, we can avoid much unnecessary sorrow, and we may be able to effect good beyond our wildest imagining.

May we all make such choices in 2018.