

Walking in your shoes

In 1895 Mary Torrans Lathrap, a Local Preacher in the Methodist Church in America, wrote. Poem, called 'Judge Softly':

*Just walk a mile in his moccasins
Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.
If just for one hour, you could find a way
To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.*

There is some confusion as to whether the phrase 'to walk a mile in his moccasins' came from the native north American saying or not. We know that Mary Lathrap was involved in working with people 'on the margins', particularly on the reservations of the indigenous population.

Whichever is the case, it hides a nugget of truth. If we really want to understand, then we need to put ourselves into the story, to walk in other people's shoes or 'moccasins' as in the poem.

I want to play with these words for a little while, walking in someone else's shoes. This presents me with some difficulties. To start with, they might not fit! I have a variety of shoes, but if I were to try and get into someone else's shoes, it could be a painful experience! For example, trying to wear Margaret's shoes wouldn't go well!

In addition, most of us have different shoes for different occasions. I do and Margaret certainly does! Whether it is heels for a nice evening out, or boots for a hike up a mountain, or even in lockdown where we spend most of our time in slippers! The truth is we can't walk in someone else's shoes, unless of course you happen to be the same shoe size, but even then it doesn't mean they would fit comfortably!

And this is what it is like when we try to read the many stories and narratives in scripture. We can't really understand all the text, particularly one which is so old, because we have not lived the life of the characters. We have not grown up with Moses or St. Paul, we have not had their experiences and an understanding of their world. Two thousand years is a long time! Even biblical scholars are still discussing and trying hard to understand these age old accounts of great wisdom, so what hope do we have!

So what can we do? We can only really look at these stories in the light of our own experiences and apply our own understanding of the world around us now. We can walk in 'our own shoes' and try to read these stories through our own experience of the world around us, of human relations and our understanding of God.

So let's do it, let's put 'our own shoes' on and see what these two stories tell us about God.

Let's start with Moses, the reluctant leader. Last week we heard about Jonah the moaner, but Moses was much the same. His life was moderately comfortable and he didn't want it unsettled, and knew only too well what reaction he would get when he went to Pharaoh, and he didn't relish the prospect! It took a life changing experience to make him rethink! We have heard the story. He was out in the desert and all of a sudden a bush fire started up, and yet this was no ordinary bush fire. It was like a fire, but nothing was burning. Moses knew he was in the presence of something special, in the presence of God Himself. It needed this jolt to make him sit up and listen.

The same with Saul, Paul's trip to Damascus and the blinding light experience. Immediately, Saul was jolted out his current seeming obsession with bringing the followers of Jesus to justice as he saw it.

A really good story resonates with the person reading or hearing it. A preacher might turn to you at this point and say 'what is God calling you to do?'. Personally, I believe that is a tough question and in truth one that most of us would find hard to answer. In the middle of a pandemic when all our lives have been turned upside down, that some for some of us it has been the jolt we need to change our lifestyle, our way. It is certainly true that life is very different for us all. For some of us we may be more determined to follow the path we have chosen, or it might simply be that we have become more content with the simpler pleasures of life or for some it has been the chance to rethink their priorities in life.

I have always found both stories such powerful stories and yet I find it hard to explain why. In both cases they are stories of a God who uses people to stand up against injustice. They both tell of people who were prepared to speak truth to power, as it were. The little people challenging the powerful. There are so many stories like this in the bible, where the little people take on the big people. David gets the giant Goliath, the prophets Amos and Hosea challenge the unjust and Jesus turns over the tables in the temple and ultimately, the powers that be brought Jesus to trial and crucifixion.

All of these stories started with a profound sense that something was wrong and it needed to be put right. I do believe that God calls each one of us to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, to call people to account for wrongdoings and to work for justice and goodness in our world.

There is one more point from both these stories. Moses was told to take off his shoes. He was now on holy ground. He didn't need his shoes for support anymore, because he was walking in the presence of God. God was with him, God walked beside him and carried him when he needed to be. God was there with him and was all sufficient. For Saul, God was there in other people. He went to the house of Judas and God sent Ananias to him.

As we emerge from the most difficult and for many, the most traumatic event in our lives these stories give us hope. As we remember the suffering that many have had to endure, the losses of life, the physical and mental exhaustion that now dominates some people's lives, these stories bring me a sense of hope:

God is with us, God is with us in a powerful and ever present way. But God is also with us in each other. We can walk together, understand each other, comfort each other, rebuild together and find a new hope and a new way together. That's what walking in someone else's shoes means to me.

Another verse from the poem 'Judge Softly; that we began with:

*Remember to walk a mile in his moccasins
And remember the lessons of humanity taught to you by your elders.
We will be known forever by the tracks we leave
In other people's lives, our kindnesses and generosity.*

"Judge Softly"

"Pray, don't find fault with the man that limps,
Or stumbles along the road.
Unless you have worn the moccasins he wears,
Or stumbled beneath the same load.

There may be tears in his soles that hurt
Though hidden away from view.
The burden he bears placed on your back
May cause you to stumble and fall, too.

Don't sneer at the man who is down today
Unless you have felt the same blow
That caused his fall or felt the shame
That only the fallen know.

You may be strong, but still the blows
That were his, unknown to you in the same way,
May cause you to stagger and fall, too.

Don't be too harsh with the man that sins.
Or pelt him with words, or stone, or disdain.
Unless you are sure you have no sins of your own,
And it's only wisdom and love that your heart contains.

For you know if the tempter's voice
Should whisper as soft to you,

As it did to him when he went astray,
It might cause you to falter, too.

Just walk a mile in his moccasins
Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.
If just for one hour, you could find a way
To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.

I believe you'd be surprised to see
That you've been blind and narrow-minded, even unkind.
There are people on reservations and in the ghettos
Who have so little hope, and too much worry on their minds.

Brother, there but for the grace of God go you and I.
Just for a moment, slip into his mind and traditions
And see the world through his spirit and eyes
Before you cast a stone or falsely judge his conditions.

Remember to walk a mile in his moccasins
And remember the lessons of humanity taught to you by your elders.
We will be known forever by the tracks we leave
In other people's lives, our kindnesses and generosity.

Take the time to walk a mile in his moccasins."

~ by Mary T. Lathrap, 1895