

## Barren, but beautiful

Let me share with you a little prayer experience of unusual clarity. I was strolling down a long tree-lined drive in the countryside. As I walked I prayed, or at least tried to pray. I suspected I was thinking rather than praying, and my mind was agitated. I was mulling over the state of the Church, acutely aware of our failings and feeling frustrated and irritated by a particular group of people in the Church.

'What do you want to say to me, Lord?' I asked.

Instantly the Lord 'spoke' back (not a usual occurrence!): 'Look over there. See that tree?'

I turned and immediately recognized the tree. Its huge trunk and intricate mass of branches formed a magnificent dark silhouette against the pale evening sky. It was a breathtaking sight. But what was unique about this tree was that it was completely bare. Amidst all the leafy trees surrounding it, this one stood utterly barren - not a single leaf or bud.

The Lord spoke again. 'It is barren. But it is beautiful.'

Immediately I understood the image. The tree symbolised the Church - we, the people of God, struggling to live our vocation amidst the pressures of our age. Often times we appear barren and lifeless. The secular culture is so strong and our Christian efforts seem meagre by comparison. Yet here was

the Lord boldly declaring his delight in us, vividly showing me the beauty and magnificence of the Church. I felt thrilled. How wonderful to know we are deeply loved, even when we feel broken and unlovable!

Fascinated by the palpable nearness of God's presence, I approached the tree to have a closer look. But as I observed it from its base my delight turned to skepticism. 'Lord,' I said. 'This tree isn't just barren. It's *dead!*' I had never seen such a lifeless one. This was no deciduous tree awaiting the spring to burst into life. It was the height of summer and the tree was as dead as its fallen branches lying broken and decaying at its base.

Again the Lord spoke. 'Go back to where you were standing and look again.'

I walked back to where I had first observed the tree, about 25 metres away. Again, its magnificence struck me. It really did look beautiful.

And the Lord said: 'It is beautiful because it is ONE.'

I was being reminded of a core truth. With branches connected to one another and to the trunk with roots deep in the earth (and therefore united with all living things), the tree formed a picture of exquisite beauty. But broken off the branches amounted to a pile of dead wood, like the ones I had seen lying under the tree. And so it is with the Church. No matter how futile our efforts may seem, no matter what wounds and scars we bear, what makes us beautiful is the way we love

one another in the Lord, the source of all life. Unity is the key to our mission, without which all our structures and good works amount to little. This was Christ's great prayer for the Church (Jn 17:21), not that we be flawless or even 'right' but that we may be one. •

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