

What it all amounts to

by A Soule

Most of us are taught the right things by our parents; be good, don't fight, play fair, don't show off unnecessarily, and so on. But some things fall off along the way as we grow older. And how different it is when we try to find our way around the world. The unspoken message which one hears echoed around us is that you need to look after Number One - that is you yourself.

A long time friend of mine, let's call him John, once talking about his difficult childhood (being abandoned by his father when he was growing up) summed up his philosophy of life neatly: 'I knew the score, John will look after John'. He is now a very successful businessman. He has gone up and down in business, but nothing seems to unsettle him, for long. He always comes out on top - John looks after John, and does it quite well it seems.

On the face of it, looking after Number One does seem the sensible thing to do. The argument goes - if everyone looked after themselves, we would all do well and fulfil our dreams. And there is some truth in this; after all even to help others one has first to be in a position to do so.

As arguments go, one can see its appeal to the mind for it is 'a very rational argument' - it is well thought out and even fair. In fact, this approach would be an ideal fit for a 'fair and a rational world'. But here's the problem, the world we live in and what life throws at us can be far from rational or fair. In life two plus two may not add up to four- it could come out less or more than four. All of us have at some point in our lives have asked the question - why did this happen or how did that happen?

A crisis can come out of the blue. If at all you have the time to prepare, you can plan for that logistically; but how we face it largely depends on what our approach to life is then. And every once in a while we come across instances which can make us think that there is more to human nature than anyone could have predicted.

Sometime ago I read about such an individual action of a sailor in a book (by AG Gardiner) which has stuck with me ever since. This happened around the First World War. On a cold January night in 1915, an English Naval ship named 'Formidable'¹ had been torpedoed in the seas, and it became inevitable that the ship would go down. Ballots were cast for who should board the rescue boats there, and this young sailor had won. The ship would sink with all left on board but he would be saved.

The author in describing the incident tried to imagine what would have been going on in the sailor's mind at that point. As the boat awaits for him to take him to security and comfort from a certain and a horrifying death, he also sees his fellow sailors, looking at him, perhaps not with envy but with resignation of men who see death hovering over them - and I like to imagine,

¹ This was the HMS Formidable commissioned in 1898; there have been about three other ships since also named HMS Formidable.

wishing him well in the end. He also looks across at the cold, dark sea which would surely be their watery grave. The sailor hesitates a bit, not certain how he should bid them good bye. He looks at one of the older sailors smiling at him trying to make it easier for him to leave.

He cannot do it. In one of those supreme moments, when one has to choose between life and death, he makes his choice. He looks at one of his fellow sailors saying, "You've got parents," then swiftly adds. "I haven't." He makes that sailor take his place in the boat and chooses to die with all the rest.

There were no long drawn melodramatic speeches or rationalisations but only a straightforward simple decision was made. He understood that he wouldn't be able to live with himself knowing he could have saved someone but hadn't. For all what the world teaches about looking after Number One, he didn't.

I am pretty sure anyone reading about this incident will not fail to conclude that there is something more to human nature than simply a two plus two equals four approach. What happens to others affects us all. And as none other than the greatest of those who laid his life for others said, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'.

There is no doubt a deep theological significance of Christ's death and resurrection. But on a straightforward, simple level it was an act love for all humanity.

Like it or not we are all connected to each other, and we are more ourselves when we understand that what happens to others affects us all.

Acts of sacrifice and compassion, somewhat similar to that made by the sailor are also happening here and now. Which of us hasn't felt the tumult of feelings at seeing the NHS staff now battling a very deadly enemy at close quarters. Whilst we rightly stay at home, they are at the front, witnessing death at close quarters, holding hands of people in their last moments. How many of us have clapped for them with in awe of the sheer magnitude of their service.

This is humanity at its best, with acts of heroism happening every day in hospital wards and communities across the country. This is who we can be when called upon. We are definitely more than those just looking after Number One.