

Gracious Drops

As a young man, I'd sometimes wander down to the seafront at Harwich, during the early hours of the morning. It was a desolate, forlorn place, and even the harbour lights dancing on the water couldn't wholly disguise the bleak severity of the scene. One time, there was a storm: thunderous waves crashing against the breakwater - the cold slap of driving spray on my face, and the sting of salt water in my eyes - as the squall ripped foam from the boiling sea. Discarded, sodden paper was flying past me, or clutching at my shins in a clammy embrace - only to be torn away by the next heaving gust.

I took refuge in one of the shelters. It was familiar territory - I often drank there during the day. The blackness of night hid the graffiti, but even the raw easterly gale couldn't purge the odour of stale urine. Somewhere, the mournful double-tone of a diesel locomotive's horn momentarily overcame the shrill wind, but was itself swallowed up by the roaring, angry sea, as it thumped - yet again - into the shoreline. I carefully unscrewed my bottle of Gordon's - took a long pull - and began my journey towards that twilight zone... where dream and fantasy, nightmare and reality, converge on the edge of consciousness. But before the arms of Morpheus entwined around me - perhaps to soothe, perhaps to torment - I pondered anew my sense of utter alienation from the rest of humanity.

Alcohol had dulled the pain of my childhood. It was my best friend through my teenage years, and my only friend as an adult. But it came at a price. Part of that price, was that it had effectively destroyed any feeling of kinship with mankind. I didn't belong with them, or to them. I didn't even think of them as fellow-travellers - to me they had become merely the "carbon-based units" of sci-fi: They were pointless automatons..... dull, and incapable of a single original thought. In my mind, they were epitomized by a notional clerk from Peterborough who watched Coronation Street, and had sex once a week after "Match of the Day". But in my weaker moments, I'd have given *anything* to be that clerk. I loathed *and* envied him in equal measure.

With sobriety and faith, there came that sense of kinship. Alarmingly, there also came the beginning of love, and something which I later identified as compassion. People started to matter to me, shocking though that was. Having spent years medicating my own pain, I now found myself freely entering into the pain of others. And not just with "nice" people - or those I was close to - but with convicts, addicts and strangers. There is a curious joy in helping to carry another man's burden, but even if there are also tears, I guess they are (in the words of Shakespeare's Mark Anthony) "gracious drops".

But if I have gained - or regained - my humanity, it has been the product of my walk with Christ, rather than that of any self-effort. *His* determination to enter into the suffering of others is a matter of historical record, and is always naturally reproduced in those who genuinely follow him. Much of the suffering in the world - whether from war or famine, oppression or terrorism - is really just the outworking of an inability to see others through the eyes of Christ.

I'm sure most people are good-natured, and have never felt that deep hostility and estrangement of which I write. Nonetheless, being good-natured doesn't change the world - nor yet, our little corner of it. Just to begin to do even that much, we will first need to be changed *ourselves*.