

Along the track

It's Just Harmless

I was in college with a person who was a master at labelling others with nicknames, myself included. Some were clever, some were funny, some were incomprehensible, some were original, witty even. But they all had one thing in common. They hurt. And I suggest that they encouraged the one who thought up the taunt. He was well known for it, even fifty or more years later. But it also encouraged the recipient to share the pain and hurt. We called his victims by those names and sometimes we even made up our own.

'Oh, come on, it's just a bit of harmless fun'. 'It's just a joke.' 'I didn't do any harm. Don't take life so seriously.' 'Get used to it, it's a hard world out there'. To the one giving the nickname or telling the joke it may be harmless fun, but to the recipient it is not.

Physical appearance, ethnic and racial backgrounds, sporting or academic ability (or lack of them), personal traits and any number of attributes can make us attractive to each other, they can be sources of friendship and admiration or they can be a source of ridicule, mockery and indeed personal abuse.

It is not surprising that so many people today are speaking up about past insults, abuse, for hurt and wrongs inflicted on them. And so they should. It doesn't matter that it was so long ago, in the past, that they won't just 'get over it'. The world will be a better place without the taunts, the nicknames, the bullying – in reality that is what it is. The "names" did hurt us. They left their mark. They can often come at a vulnerable time in our lives. Nick-namers and bullies are good at picking that. That hurt can remain with us for days, or years, or even decades.

But they do more than that. They help perpetuate aspects of life that we are better off leaving behind. Fair enough, that may not have been the nick-namer's intent and it may have been considered 'just a bit of fun' but that still helps build or perpetuate a wider image. Even seemingly 'innocent' or witty nicknames can help perpetuate stereotyping, racism, sexism or just putting others down. Violence often starts with putting down others – it can be and often is, the next step. They help create the power imbalance that has been the root of so much abuse we have witnessed or become aware of from the media.

But isn't all this taking things a bit too seriously? It is not surprising that those engaged in this type of

behaviour generally do not consider that their behaviour is prejudicial in any way. Generally they are not the ones being subjected to the taunts or the labels. They are ones who are 'just having fun', not having fun made of them.

One of the gifts the Christian Churches have offered the world for centuries is the theology of the human person. Individuals may not have lived up to it, as we have witnessed in recent decades but it was used as a resource for the Bill of Rights, as the basis for Nelson Mandela's Truth and Reconciliation Commission as examples. In part it says:

1. Our highest human calling is to love and be loved.
2. Love demands that we work for equality, fairness, justice and peace.
3. Each person possesses a basic dignity that does not depend on any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status.
4. Each person is essentially good. Each person should be treated with dignity and respect.
5. Each person has inalienable freedoms, rights, and responsibilities-essentially to become a fully alive human being.
6. The poor and marginalised should be the focus of particular concern, they should have access to the same rights and freedoms we enjoy, more than just the basic necessities of life.
7. Each person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religious belief.
8. Each person has a conscience that alerts them to what is right and wrong, to choose what is moral over immoral.
9. Our lives have a lasting worth, having a purpose that reaches beyond ourselves and our own time.

Pope Benedict summed it up this way:

"Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed. Each of us is loved. Each of us is necessary." Pope Benedict XVI

Nicknames, bullying, belittling don't 'toughen us up'. They may be intended as harmless fun but they leave their mark.

Regards
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