

26 Isn't Christianity a crutch for the weak?

Isn't Christianity a crutch for the weak? You could say 'yes' or 'no'. 'Yes I'm weak and my faith is a crutch that helps me live my life'. Or you could say 'Definitely not – Christians don't hobble through life, they sail along'.

To be a Christian is to welcome the helping hand of God. Everyone on the earth has to struggle along through sin, sickness, frustration, addiction, anxiety and the fear of death and disaster. To live with Jesus is to see a force at work in your life that's more powerful than any of these crippling realities.

If you know God's forgiveness, sin loses its crippling power. If you know the healing power of Jesus, sickness is less crippling. If you know the Holy Spirit at work in your life, fear becomes courage. *The one who is in you* St John says *is greater than the one who is in the world* (1 John 4:4b) that is, the devil.

The image of Christianity as a crutch sounds particularly offensive to the self sufficient. *It's my life and I'll get on with it*. How sad it is, the failure to face up to human inadequacy and the fact we exist as dependent creatures! To know your need of grace is the Christian distinctive, to know you're a derived being not an independent being. When you believe that, you come to see a power at work in you which St. Paul says *is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*. (Ephesians 3:20b).

Cuthbert Bardsley was Bishop of Coventry for 20 years and supervised the building of the new Cathedral alongside the bombed ruins of the old building. Speaking at his farewell service in 1976 Bishop Bardsley said there were three things he saw more clearly than he did when he began as Bishop 20 years before. First that nothing worthwhile is achieved without suffering. Second that it's not by human activity but by divine action that progress is made and third that hope isn't man-made but God-given. "*You cannot: God can, through you*" was a continual refrain in his speaking and teaching.

Christian faith isn't a crutch in the sense of supporting the way people are. It's a means of lifting them up into a whole new way of life that's out of this world. As C.S.Lewis wrote *Mere improvement is not redemption... God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature*.

Whether you see Christianity as a crutch or not it's something that makes you strong, something transformational and out of this world. We're in God's image and can be made like Him. As Paul expresses it in 2 Corinthians: *all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another* (3:19).

Christianity's about overcoming our weaknesses but it's also about seeing our strengths get directed to God's praise and service. The 20th century German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected in prison on the sinful destructiveness that had come about through the misuse of power by the Nazis. He was so

bold as to suggest, as an example, that Napoleon's sin was as much his misuse of power as his sexual infidelities. Too often the church seems more concerned about what goes on in the bedroom than what goes on in the board room.

Jesus came for both the weak and the strong. He wants to help us with the struggle against our weaknesses. He also wants to lay hold of our strengths so they can be used to build his kingdom of justice, love and peace!

In Christian shrines crutches are hung up to witness the ongoing healing ministry of Jesus that lifts people to God *in body, mind and spirit* (1 Thessalonians 5:23). All through the gospel we see Jesus making crutches redundant as crippled people welcome his healing touch. Not everyone was healed though. Some had to keep their crutches.

It's the same today. As Cuthbert Bardsley remarked, rejoicing at the end of his ministry, the possibilities of God are released again and again through faith. "*You cannot: God can, through you*".

He also had to say that *nothing worthwhile is achieved without suffering*. He knew that some of the holiest of people literally limp through life.