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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

To love a child brings both joy and heartache

THEY say the only constancy is change. No matter how hard we try to keep things as they are, change inevitably has its way. It is this which gives life its tragic sense.

Parents of young children will know what I mean. Despite all its pressures, parenthood provides untold joy. The satisfaction of bringing new life into the world is but the first step in forming a family. As the family grows, parents discover the meaning of true happiness and love.

The beauty of parenthood is in the way it emotionally and morally enhances you. Realising that others now depend on you for survival, selfishness gives way to sacrifice. Suddenly, you understand why love is the only law.

Mrs Dooley and I often reflect on how parenthood has transformed us. We no longer worry about ourselves, but only about those little beings that depend on us for everything. What we do we do for them; it is this which gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

This is not to say that parenthood is all sweetness and light. Children have no conception of fatigue or the limitations of the human body. They cannot understand why Mrs Dooley does not appreciate being serenaded at 3am, or why their father hides in his study simply to get some rest.

However, all that means nothing when compared to the endless hours of laughter and affection which animate our home. It means nothing when you consider a parent's real legacy is their children. Everything else is simply straw.

Yet, there comes a moment in every parent's life when they realise this is not forever. Out of the blue, it suddenly dawns that the family is not an end in itself, that it is a temporary entity which must ultimately disintegrate. I experienced that moment last week. Driving to church on Sunday morning, we listen to Tim Thurston's wonderful programme of sacred music on Lyric FM. Following Gloria, I switch channels in order to hear the news headlines. It shatters the serene mood, but knowing what is going on in the world is an occupational necessity.

Then it happened. 'How can you listen to that awful stuff about murder and death? It shouldn't be on when we're going to Mass.'

When I told my nine-year-old that it is important to hear the news even when distressing, he shot back: 'Not on a Sunday, it's not!'

This is the same boy who, only a

week earlier, asked his first serious question about the opposite sex. Then, much to my horror, I found him reading the newspaper. What's wrong with that, you might ask. Nothing, except that he was poring over celebrity gossip concerning affairs and broken marriages.

Slowly but surely, my little boy is becoming self-dependent. He is breaking free of his relatively sheltered existence in order to explore the world beyond. And, in remonstrating with his father about serious issues, he is displaying a mature awareness of life.

I know this is as it should be, and I would be concerned if it were not so. Still, I cannot help lament the fact that it is sign of great change. It is proof that this beautiful time is but a single stage on life's way.

More and more I come to appreciate why parents should cherish every second with their children. No time you spend with them is wasted, so long as you put their needs first. By this I do not mean that parents should become enslaved to their progeny, but that what you sacrifice on their behalf is returned tenfold.

Driving home from Mass, my son quizzed me again. 'Were Adam and Eve still in the Garden of Eden when dinosaurs were on Earth?' No amount of philosophical sophistication can prepare you for that.

FOR a half an hour, we discussed Genesis, evolution and why, in my view, Darwin does nothing to disprove the theological account of our origins. The 'why' of the world is a mystery that refuses to yield up its secrets, I explained. 'I think I get it,' he said, but I know that challenging conversation is but the first of many to come.

At one level, I am overjoyed that a boy so young is putting together the pieces so well.

There is, however, another part of me that cries out against it. I am not yet ready for the changes that have already begun, and will not abate until Mrs Dooley and I are once again alone.

That said, I know this is all part of parental sacrifice. I know the best gift you can give your children is to bring them up well and then let them go. For that is what parenthood is: a long preparation for saying 'goodbye'.

Yesterday, my five-year-old announced he wanted to live with his parents forever. Until recently, I would have greeted that proclamation with tears of joy.

Now, my smile can barely conceal the real tears that are flowing inside.

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