

31st January 2023

Ragged

"We often confuse unconditional love with unconditional approval."

Henri Nouwen, *Living in the Spirit*

Exploring the background to St Vincent de Paul yesterday, and referencing Don McLean's song, *Vincent*, about the artist Vincent Van Gogh, I went back to the lyrics of the song. It opens with these words:

*Starry, starry night, paint your palette blue and gray,
Look out on a summer's day
With eyes that know the darkness in my soul.*

Here is Don McLean finding meaning in Van Gogh's painting, "The Starry Night". It speaks to the deepest and darkest places of his soul. Here is communication from one artist to another, with McLean then communicating his own artistry to the souls of those who are touched by his song. But it's another section of *Vincent* that interests *me* today.

*Like the strangers that you've met,
The ragged men in ragged clothes,
The silver thorn of bloody rose
Lie crushed and broken on the virgin snow.
Now, I think I know what you tried to say to me,
How you suffered for your sanity, how you tried to set them free.
They would not listen, they're not listening still;
Perhaps they never will.*

Round about us there are men and women who are ragged, dressed in ragged clothes, those silver thorns that "lie crushed and broken in the virgin snow." With our Christ-inspired compassion we reach out to them in their need, like Vincent de Paul of old, to offer our unconditional love.

There are three things that matter in the offering of such loving service. The first is that those we seek to set free from the entrapment of their circumstances, whatever those might be, might not listen, and "perhaps they never will". But should that negate the purpose of our service? The second is that loving unconditionally does not mean we offer unconditional approval, as Henri Nouwen reminds us. And, most importantly, we offer our service without any expectation of a return on our investment. It is giving for the sake of giving, and not for any pay-off.

Those dressed in ragged clothes need our love – no matter what.

A prayer for today

Remind me, Lord, that in serving ragged people, we come face to face with you. Amen

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