

God revealed

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Acts 9:1-6, Psalm 30, Rev 5:6-14, John 21.1-19

I was in the supermarket the other day and I had a very disturbing moment. I wanted to buy some liquid soap to refill my containers at home. I found the section in the supermarket and then started to try and make a decision. There were six shelves of every possible brand and scent before me. I went into choice overload. What was I going to choose and how? On price, brand, value for money, smell, colour, environmental credentials, was it made in Australia, how do you decide this stuff? I stood there for a while struggling with the choice and ended up feeling completely stupid. I mean how hard is it to choose liquid soap?

Sometimes we can turn our spiritual life or faith journey into the same consumer quest. Have you noticed how many different ways are offered to enlightenment and salvation or at least some sort of experience with the transcendent? Open up any women's magazine and check out the four pages of clairvoyants, astrologers and fortunetellers. Walk through any bookstore and peruse the self-help and spirituality sections. Open up the street directory, look under churches and notice all the Christian denominations, the Moslem groups, the Buddhist temples, the Falun Gong, the Church of Scientology and the Hare Krishnas. There are so many ways to go, so many paths to follow, so many different options. What criteria do we use to choose? How do we decide amongst all those options?

Well I am standing here with some good news. Christianity is a "revealed religion." That is it is based not on human discovery but on divine self-disclosure. The true Christian path is not found by going to the supermarket of spiritual ideas and choosing amongst all those attractive but confusing options. Instead the Lord comes to us.

From the biblical accounts the historical Jesus did not sit around and wait for people to turn up and begin to follow his teachings. He went out amongst people and communities. He walked right up to people, looked them in the eye and said follow me. The resurrected Jesus did the same thing. He did not hide away expecting that people would find where he was. He went to where they were—hiding behind closed doors, traveling from place to place, fishing on the lake in the early morning. And the Christ of faith does the same thing—he is not hidden away in some sacred tabernacle hoping someone is going to turn up and give him his due. He goes to where we are and reveals himself to us.

Our three readings all have examples of this revealing of the Lord. The reading from Acts has perhaps the most famous conversion story in history. Saul, "breathing threats and murder" encounters the risen & ascended Lord Jesus. The encounter changes his life's direction in the most radical and profound way. From being a violent, rage-filled persecutor he becomes a proclaimer of Christ. From being blind he comes to see. From being a zealous adherent to religious purity and law he becomes a teacher of inclusion, diversity and freedom all within the framework of God's love in and through Christ. This all comes about because Saul was stopped dead in his tracks by the presence of the Lord who revealed himself on a dusty road to Damascus.

When we turn to the reading from Revelation we find the whole book is about revelation, the revealing of God and God's ultimate purposes to John the writer. Revelation is a book of imagination and vision and the way to engage with it is with the imagination—not with the rational intellect that will struggle to understand it literally. One very good reason to read the book imaginatively is that there are problems with past, present and future tenses in the book.

We are actually not sure which time Revelation is talking about. Instead we are as it were caught up in the cosmic vision and we, as John did, see all of human history unfolding at once. Destruction, suffering, salvation, deliverance; all happen together and apart. This revelation is not simple or easy and it challenges us on all sorts of levels. The revealing of the Lord is like that. Yes, comfort and assurance are part of our encounter with the Christ but so too is discomfort and challenge.

In the Gospel reading we have the encounter between Jesus and the disciples beside the Sea of Tiberias. Jesus reveals himself to the men in the fishing boat by reminding them of what he had done in the past – helped them catch a great load of fish. They ‘see’ him finally and Peter does that wonderful thing where he puts on some clothes and jumps into the sea and like a mad man swims the hundred yards to shore. It is interesting isn’t it the different reactions of Saul and Peter? Saul has never met Jesus the Christ before and he is carefully guided and coached to his next step. Peter has met Jesus the Christ before, knows him well and intimately and loves him deeply. He thinks he has seen the Lord again and he is off—over the boat, getting to Jesus as fast as he can, his excitement and passion driving him forward.

There are differences then but let me just highlight some similarities in what happens and what the two men are asked to do. Both men encounter the risen Lord and in that encounter they also discover forgiveness and acceptance. The forgiveness and acceptance of Saul is perhaps the most striking.

Here is a man who conscientiously and literally religiously persecuted the followers of Jesus. Yet he is chosen and forgiven and sent to preach the message of radical love. There is not a hint of retributive justice here. No going off to prison to do time for past sins, just a complete turn around and a new start. Peter too encounters the same forgiveness and acceptance. His former denial of Jesus is not held against him and he too is offered the chance of a new life and purpose. Commentators have suggested that the question Jesus asks three times, “Peter, do you love me?”, is meant to give Peter the chance to accept Jesus three times in contrast to the three times he denied him in the courtyard of the high priest. What a balm to Peter’s soul this must have been and how healing? The forgiveness of Christ is like that—it is more than just the acceptance of an apology and a wiping of the slate. We are offered more than some comforting words. We are offered healing and wholeness as well.

As well as discovering the Lord in the simple events of their every day life both the Saul and Peter are offered a purpose and a mission. In all three readings we find that the message of the Good News is meant to for all people—not just a select few from a particular tribal or national background. Saul who becomes Paul finds that his new task is not to protect the national and tribal interests of the Jewish people. It is to take Jesus message to the non-Jewish people. In the reading from Revelation we hear that the message of Christ redeems those from every tribe, language, people and nation and in the Gospel reading the 153 large fish Peter hauled ashore is thought to be a symbolic number. There are many perspectives, one of which is from Tom Gillespie, NT professor (and president) of Princeton Seminary, who writes that at the time the Gospel of John was written, there were believed to be 153 different ethnic groups in the world.

The revelation in these three readings is pretty clear—the Good News of the resurrected Christ is meant for everyone and like Saul we are called to bring that message to the world around us. Our task is not to man the barricades, circle the wagons and protect the tribe—our church here of St Philip’s. Our task is to reach out to others and proclaim and live the Good News—and we are meant to put our lives on the line and surrender our egos to do it.

So here is the thing. We do not need to go to the spiritual supermarket of ideas to find the true God and our purpose in life. In fact heading off to that place can cause more confusion

than we need. Instead we stay where we are and we ask God to reveal Godself to us. When I hear of someone saying, “I do not know if God exists. I don’t really think anything is there. I wish I did know”, I sometimes think, “well have you tried getting on your knees and asking God to reveal himself to you? Have you honestly opened your heart to the possibility that God might show you or are you stuck in the supermarket aisle trying to work it out for yourself?”

That is what the spiritual practice of contemplation is—we surrender ourselves to the present moment, we open our minds and hearts and we begin to pay attention to the signs of divinity around us—God revealed in creation, in our prayers, our meditations, our bible reading, in the sacraments, in our daily life and tasks and in our hearts and the people we meet.

However I have a few words of warning. When we ask the risen Lord to reveal himself to us he does not necessarily come with blinding light and overwhelming presence, although I have heard of that happening to some people—one of whom was a very close friend of mine. The Lord is just as likely to come in the soft breeze, the gentle touch and the brief moment of inspiration and certainty. Secondly the Lord always come with a purpose—it might be to offer you comfort and solace, it might be to assure you of love and forgiveness and it might be to make you uncomfortable and unsettled so you become more open. Underneath it all will be the purpose of bringing you to fullness of life and aligning your being with his will.

And the stories of Peter and Paul and in fact the scene from Revelation contain one vital element—they all involve surrender and acceptance. One of my favourite 20th century stories is of William Wilson. Bill was a drunk. In the middle of the depression in the ’30s, he found himself in a hospital in New York drying out. He cried out, “If there is a God, let him show himself. I’m ready to do anything, anything!” Bill was one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous and through this group has come a process of healing for countless people in over 100 countries around the world. It is one thing to ask God to reveal himself to us. It is a whole other thing to surrender to his will and purpose. Can we say like Peter, Paul and Bill, “I am ready to do anything?”

Getting to the place of saying that and meaning that is often a heart wrenching or rather ego-wrenching struggle. Bill had to reach a painful and shame-filled place of bottoming out before he was willing to do God’s will. Paul had to be blinded by light to be turned to a new purpose and Peter had to fail miserably and publicly to know what true commitment was really all about.

I have another suggestion ... humbly ask the Lord to reveal himself to you and ask for the courage and strength to carry out his will. In this way the Kingdom comes and fullness of life floods your life and the life of those around you. Amen.