

For Love of the World

Session 5: "Whoever Serves me the Father will Honour" (Jn 12.26)

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Gospel = John 12.20-33

Pattern = Despair

Practise = Hope

Discipline = Gratitude

When I was high school, we studied the poet T.S. Eliot, particularly his poem, "The Hollow Men". One verse has stayed with me for many years:

This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends,
Not with a bang but a whimper.

They are words that evoke despair and shattered dreams. Despair is a word that comes to mind when I reflect on Jesus' state of mind leading up to the Passover and the events of Good Friday. In our gospel reading he says that his 'soul is troubled' (20.27). In Matthew he is 'deeply grieved' (26.32). In Luke he is 'in anguish' (22.43) and in Mark he is 'distressed and agitated' (14.33). Jesus of course was overwhelmed by what he suspected or knew was coming—betrayal, pain and death.

At the end of the day, with all the facts about the environmental crisis, as we approach Holy Week and the tragedy and violence of the cross, we too can easily loose heart. If we allow ourselves to ponder the immensity of the universe against the plight of the environment on Earth, the violence of the human species and our own weakness and limitations, it is easy to feel discouraged and overwhelmed. But in a very real way we are feeling compassion: we are "suffering with." The distress we feel is because we sense our connection to the larger whole of which we are a part. The end point of this distress and discouragement is despair. Not a rage about injustice, not an outpouring of sorrow, but the powerless whimper of despair. Being human and needing to survive, when we approach a state of despair we can often move into disbelief, denial and a double life. And so we tend to live our lives as if nothing has changed, while knowing that everything has changed.

Yet despair is actually a good sign. Dmitri Shostakovish wrote, "When a man is in despair, it means that he still believes in something." This is of course what made the difference for Jesus. Despite his distress he trusted and obeyed his father, his creator God. He believed in a loving greater power than himself and he surrendered to its greater wisdom and plan without perhaps fully knowing the outcome. It is certainly a more productive place than denial. In Albert Camus' novel *The Plague*, those who fought the problem did not expect to find a solution. They only decided to live differently while they did live, to live as if life mattered while they had it, to live with integrity in the light



of the brutal reality of their world.¹ Sally McFague writes that ‘one has to get up in the morning and look in the mirror’. Our actions may come lead us to nothing more than that.

How do we keep getting up in the morning in the face of all the things that overwhelm, distress and grieve us? How do we move through despair and to the other side of action?

For countless Christians, for many of centuries, the start of our movement out of despair is through being grounded, rooted, planted in God – day-by-day, moment-by-moment. It is in this reality that social justice and action is sustained. Evelyn Underhill tells the story of the Oxford Methodists, who began by trying only to worship God and adhere to a strict devotional rule. Soon they found themselves impelled to try and ‘do’ good by active social work. Contemplation, love of the divine, goes hand in hand with action. This is the Spirit filled life of a Christ follower. As Ruysbroeck said, “then only is our life a whole, when work and contemplation dwell in us side by side, and we are perfectly in both of them at once.”²

This is the wonder and genius of Christianity. It holds in creative tension these seeming paradoxes. But the start is not activism. The start is being at-one with God.

Hope is one of the consequences of being in this place. It is a fruit of God’s spirit in us when we love both God and the world. It is the fruit of trust in God. Hope has been called both the quintessential Christian virtue and its greatest delusion. St Paul listed hope along with love and faith as essential practices, with love being the greatest (1 Cor. 13.13). Ultimately our hope is based on the resurrection, the certain knowledge of new life and new possibility. Jacques Ellul wrote:

Christian hope can face any situation, because it is not based on changeable circumstances, but a settled conviction that nothing can overtake us that Christ hasn’t taken care of. It is willing to risk all on the reality of the resurrection. We welcome the future, because it bears the face of Jesus.³

A discipline that most effectively counters the darkness of despair and the dead end of denial to which it can lead is the practice of gratitude. It also counters resentment and fear. In 1 Thessalonians Paul writes, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” I suspect that Paul encouraged his readers to do this not because he wanted to put impossible burdens before them but because prayer and gratitude *work*. I remember when I first began to practice gratitude on a daily basis. I listed simple things to be grateful about and tried to be grateful in every circumstance. Reality literally shifted. I saw the world through new eyes and I felt full of possibility and hope. With that came energy and focus. Meister Eckhart said, ‘If the only prayer you say in your life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice’.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will be my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour” (John 12.26). This is what Lent and Easter are ultimately about. We follow Jesus as he prays to his and our God. We despair with him as we face reality and the darkness and violence of our world. We surrender with him to the faithfulness and power of God. We lay down all

¹ McFague, S. *op cit*.

² Quoted in Underhill, E. *The life of the Spirit and the Life of Today*.

³ Ellul, J. Hope in time of abandonment in *Still Waters: Deep Waters*, ed. Croucher, R. Albatross Books, Australia, 1987 p.124.

that stops us from following him to the cross. We rise with him into new possibilities. We love and act so that the creation God loves and calls very good is born anew. In this service is perfect freedom and our true end.

Group reflection

Spend some time considering the above and the Gospel passage. Discuss the Gospel passage first. What words and phrases in both stood out for you?

Look at the photo below. It is of a sunset over Batemans Bay. What thoughts come to mind as you look at the photo?



When you look up at the sky what calls to you? Wonder? Hope? Gratitude?

When you think about the environmental crisis, what is your immediate reaction?

A question to ask of ourselves is, "Are we willing to risk all on the reality of the resurrection?" How do you understand the crucifixion and the resurrection? Where do you find your hope to face each day and each crisis in life?

List ten things that you are grateful about and why. Now list another ten things. Write/draw/paint/compose a simple prayer of gratitude to share with others.

A prayer of Hope by Terry Falla

As we grow in faith, love and hope,
help us to understand that no planning for the future, however necessary,
no programme, no matter how carefully conceived, can relieve us of the necessity
of going forward into a future that cannot be planned,
a future of danger, of hope in your incalculable grace.

Lord,
be for us the truth on which life and death are built,
the hope that cannot be destroyed,
the freedom from which love and justice flow
and the joy that has eternity within it. Amen.