

Reflection Notes – 5/2/17

- Geoff Stevenson

An Old-New Way in A Challenging World!

I saw the end of Julia Zemiro's biographical story show, 'Home Delivery,' with Sam Neill the other night. They were sitting talking and Neill said that he didn't really believe in religion anymore. The Bible's stories were so old they had no applicability to the world in which he lives with all of its complexities. Then when he reads science he feels so small and insignificant and also gains a sense of wonder about the profoundness of world in which we live. Ultimately he believes that the world doesn't need religion would be better without it. He recalled a joke where God indicates 'he' wishes he'd never invented religion – it is too painful.

I can understand something of what Sam Neill says – I have heard it so often. The Bible is an old book, therefore irrelevant, and religion only creates conflict, hatred, abuse and war. I suppose it does seem like this to many people. So with Sam Neill's words and the disturbing tales from the new 'Trump-era world' ringing in my mind I opened this week's readings. Imagine my surprise when I read words maybe 2500 years old that said: "...to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58:6-7). It speaks of hope and light in the world when deep compassion and justice abound in human life. I turned to the Gospel passage (Matthew 5:13-20) and encountered much the same thing. It actually continues Jesus' turning the world upside down and blessing the little ones of the earth. He speaks of compassion, mercy, justice, peacemaking, grieving the pain of life... and names these as the way of God's blessedness. Further, he suggests that those who live with these values in their hearts and guiding their actions, are like salt and light in a world that is sometimes bland or dark.

We still use the term 'not worth their salt'. It apparently comes from the times when salt was important and worth some money. One might buy a slave for an amount of salt and if they were somewhat useless or lazy wouldn't be 'worth their salt,' the amount paid for them. We still use Jesus' notion of a light on a hill.

In view of the world in which we live, one increasingly individualistic and often lacking in compassion and justice, I find these words very prescient and confronting. Far from the Bible being an old world book, irrelevant and simplistic in a complex world, it seems to lift up themes that transcend life and times and geography. Love, justice, peace, mercy, compassion and so on ought to be the currency of our world and the characteristics of world leaders who purport to rule with some sense of wisdom, responsibility and with a sense of deep and profound humanity. Sadly, we have too many power-hungry, narcissistic megalomaniacs running the show. Our society idolises the wealthy, famous, powerful, beautiful and those who seem to be able to knock out a tune or carry on before a camera. Celebrity is worshipped as we hang off every word and misadventure in the popular mags and news bites. There are a plethora of ways in which people manifest religious zeal – sometimes within the context of a religious activity and sometimes by

subsuming a person, a hobby, an interest or a movement into a fanatical, compulsive and even exclusive idolatry. They effectively see the world not through eyes of love and justice but through an obsessive literalism that defines everyone according to how they accept or reject a person's ideology. It is everywhere. Sports fans across the world can be exceptionally one-eyed (I know this within myself at times!) in both the exclusive following of one club or the exclusivity of one code or sport to be followed. The same can be said of political or philosophical ideology, for example. Other people become obsessive about accumulating wealth (investments, buying more...) or achieving success in career or other avenue of activity.

Nations fight over land, skin colour, wealth, power and old conflicts that no-one really understands or remembers. Megalomaniacs assume power and lord it over everyone creating intense struggle and much suffering. These fanatical obsessions are the stuff of religious zeal and variations on the theme that is constantly before us in this tired world. There have been many wars and massacres inflicted upon innocent people by secularists and atheists (the Hitlers, Stalins, Lenins, Pol Pots...) for diverse reasons. Similarly humans have used religious fervour and exclusivity to fight wars, defending dogma and literalist beliefs. God has been used for good and bad.

Our readings invite us into a different way. They actually challenge the narrow, exclusive and judgemental religion that Sam Neill sees as detrimental to the well-being of the world and cause of strife. The way of Jesus, if we believe his words, is a way of humility, love, peacemaking, mercy, justice and grieving the world's pain and suffering. These ancient words invite us into a way that challenges power for power's sake, along with the superficial hero-worship of celebrity, wealth and power. It is an ancient-new way, a way that is millennia old but renewed in every generation, in every context. It is a refreshing way that celebrates life and living and understands that humility and vulnerability is a courageous way that opens the self to other people as brothers and sisters, fellow pilgrims on this journey of life.

There is a legend about a missionary who was lost at sea. By chance he was washed up on the edge of a remote village. Half-dead from starvation, exposure and sea water, he was found by the people of the village and nursed back to health. He lived amongst them for the next 20 years. During that time he didn't preach a sermon, confess faith, sing songs of faith or read any Scriptures – he did nothing that we might consider an essential part of mission work. But, when the people were sick, he attended to them, often sitting long into the night. When people were hungry he gave them food. When they were lonely, he was a source of company. He taught them and shared wisdom. He sided with those who had been wronged and identified with the people's every struggle. After 20 years had passed, missionaries came from the sea to the village and began talking to the people about a man called Jesus. After hearing these stories of Jesus the natives insisted that he had lived amongst them for the last 20 years. "Come and we will introduce you to the man about whom you speak." The missionaries were led to a hut and there they found their long-lost fellow missionary whom they thought was dead. This missionary brought the beauty and wonder of God into people's lives and they experienced God in their midst. He was salt and light in the world and Jesus says that about us when we embody love and peace.