

Reflection Notes – 19/2/17

- Geoff Stevenson

A Way Beyond Violence, Hatred and Conflict...

As I write this my mind is pre-occupied with the sudden events of last night. Our little old dog became quite distressed and when we took him to the vet we were told that nothing could be done for him, given his age and declining health. It was quite a shock and this faithful little friend was gently put to sleep amidst tears, grief and shock.

As I reflect on our 15 years with Nimrod, he has been a wonderful little friend who has shared so much of our lives. Being smaller he always seemed more vulnerable than the bigger dog we have, a Labrador who seems indestructible. In his younger years he was full of energy and ran around chasing or being chased – sometimes down the street and into neighbour's homes. When we returned home he was there to welcome us, usually wanting a pat or to be held. He usually sat with one of us or under our feet, often getting in our way. He routinely went around the house checking on who was here and who was out. First thing in the morning he walked around the yard's border, doing his little patrol. We referred to this as him securing the borders – he was after all a Border Collie cross.

In his own little way Nim was always there in the midst of things. In early days there was the desire for a game and in latter years a gentle stroke of his coat or to sit in a lap. Nim was always aware of people who were more vulnerable and sat with them, almost protectively. When my aged grandmother used to come over in the last years of her life, Nim always sat next to her and looked on protectively.

As I ponder Nim and his life amongst us I am aware of his presence over these last 15 years. He was a vulnerable dog more or less at our mercy. He was a rescue dog and we got him as a pup when our previous dog died. He depended upon us for most things such as food, water, grooming, adventure beyond the yard, patting and companionship. It was this very vulnerability that gave him his strength or power in our lives. He looked at us and would bark or somehow urge us when he wanted or needed something. If he needed to go outside for toileting he had to indicate and wait for us to open the door. It was in this vulnerability that he was loved and touched our lives. He had no power of his own but his vulnerable openness and acceptance of all people broke down barriers and defences. They looked down and patted him. They laughed at his antics and we all smiled at his little personality and his vulnerable acceptance of us was disarming.

As I thought about Nim this morning through the sadness of a house quieter in his absence, I also recognised that I learned from Nim something of the wisdom of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount and the section we read this week (Matthew 5:38-48). It is a profound passage, this Sermon on the Mount. I watched a brief video clip from the movie, Ghandi, today. It is where he becomes aware that those who follow him are becoming violent in their resistance of the Empire. Ghandi is upset and has learned from Jesus, from this very passage. He declares that there will not be any violent resistance towards the British. They will not use force or the power of weapons or fighting. He declares that he will fast until the violence ends and if his fast goes too long and he dies of hunger so be it. Violence cannot be the basis for lasting peace. It doesn't work.

Ghandi knows, as Jesus taught, violence must never be used to try to achieve peace

because it is impossible. Ultimately Jesus proclaims a way that is grounded in love and relationships, building people up together and drawing them into community. Like Ghandi, Martin Luther King jr declared to all who were part of the Civil Rights movement in 1960's USA that they were not to hate the people who mistreated them but to love their enemies and pray for those who were violent and unjust. They were to resist the evil and injustice perpetrated against them but not to use violence against people.

Across the world over the last few centuries there have been many courageous movements of non-violent resistance that have brought liberation and new ways to oppressed and struggling peoples. Of course India, but also Poland, South Africa, divided Germany, USSR's breakdown and through many parts of Latin America, such as El Salvador, and elsewhere in the world. Groups of common people have come together to move for change and transformation and the power of numbers and popular movements, though often resisted by violence at first, have broken through power regimes to bring new life, hope and freedom to people caught in oppression and violence.

Over and against this, many nations continue to believe that warfare and bombs are the only means of achieving peace and an end to conflict. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of this. The wars were intended to bring peace but putting down the causes of unrest, violence and terrorism. In fact they have escalated the violence and unleashed new terrorist groups into the vacuum. It has cost the US trillions of dollars to fund these wars and little has actually been achieved beyond the chaos and suffering of untold innocent people. A few terrorists have been captured or killed but many more have been recruited and channelled into active hatred of the West through their experiences of suffering through the wars.

This is the way of empire in our world and has been for around 5000 years since human civilisation began. It is called the Myth of Redemptive Violence and is the belief that peace can be found and achieved at the end of a sword/gun/bomb... The cycle of violence often spirals out of control and empires rise and fall refusing to learn the lessons of history. Despite the ways of non-violent protest and movements of change grounded in love and forgiveness, the powers that be never learn.

Jesus walked this way of peace. He declared that the violence of the powers was evil and the injustice perpetrated upon ordinary people was evil and must be called out, resisted and transformed through movements of love, community and non-violent resistance. For this he was killed by the powers of the world. They hung him on a cross to be an example to anyone else who dared threaten the powers of the world. He gave himself up for the mission of God's peace and reconciliation in the world and ultimately it was in God's love and grace that he overcame this evil and life flourished – we call this resurrection. It is the state of being in God where we choose life and hope and to live with vulnerable abandon before the possibilities of life. I sense that we will need more and more of this in the modern Trump and Putin era world (and other dangerous megalomaniacs the seek to impose their views and themselves upon our world).

Our little dog embodied a vulnerable openness and faithfulness, accepting all who came to the house. He brought people together and seemed to thrive on relational peace and being together. He is, for me, a symbol of peacefulness and relationship. Dogs don't seem to remember slights done but seek to be in relationship with their owners.