

## Reflection Notes – 5/3/17

- Geoff Stevenson

### The Excruciating Silence that Yields Life and Vision

There's a wonderful scene in Stephen King's novel, *The Stand*, focussing on the visionary, mystic leader called Mother Abigail. Mother Abigail is an elderly black, prophetic woman who becomes the leader of one remnant group of people who have survived a holocaust. They gather around her and form a little community. After things have stabilised somewhat and everyone finds their place in this new community, Mother Abigail informs them she must go away to pray and listen to God. She wanders off into what is the post-holocaust wilderness of middle America. In this wilderness she prays and fasts in order to hear God speak to her and give her direction for the community. It is in this silent and lonely place that she is able to hear God and returns after a period to share the vision.

Mother Abigail calls four men into her make-shift hospital room and as she lays dying gives them the words she has received. They are to go into the wilderness and journey across America to make a stand against evil, personified by Randall Flagg and the community he has drawn to himself. These men are to journey without taking anything except basic clothes and so on. They are to find food and other things along the way. Clearly the point is that God will be with them and they are to trust.

The journey begins with difficulty, they get tired easily, it is hard, they complain... After a few days one of them says that the way feels easier and he feels clearer of head and being than he has for a long, long time. He finally understands that he has benefited from the silence, the simplicity and he is unwinding for the first time in many years. He likens himself to a car that has been travelling along with its engine running, the air conditioning on full bore, the radio, wipers and anything else that can drain power. He has been draining of power for sometimes now, living off stress energy, fear, adrenalin and small top ups from limited sleep and food. He has been draining rapidly, like my tablet when all the apps are running!

As he walks, there is silence and conversation. They have to contend with thoughts and feelings. They are confronted by the daemons of their lives. There is guilt, grief, fear, past actions that can't be resolved or undone, addictions and contradictions and they are initially tense, intense, stressed and running off adrenalin. The movement through this withdrawal of anxiety, fear, grief, guilt, adrenalin, confusion is not easy and they would prefer to have all manner of pervious distractions available to stop them thinking and feeling and it is hard. After a few days, the anxiety, the struggle subsides somewhat and the adrenalin has drained away. The world seems clearer and life more vivid. They see things they previously hadn't. There is beauty and wonder despite the chaos. There is also a clarity of purpose and meaning to their lives as they prepare to make a stand against evil. The wilderness journey of these four men is a preparation of body, mind and spirit.

I thought of this story when I saw an interview on Charlie Pickering's show, *The Weekly* and his interview with Simon Sinek of TED Talk fame (especially on leadership). Sinek spoke about leaders but he was also led into a conversation around the need to stop and listen, to move beyond the addictions we all experience and how we are distracted by

our plethora of devices that fill our lives with noise, sound, images, videos, text and break everything into bite sized pieces with an immediacy that demands our attention whether it is important or not. As I listened to Simon Sinek and Charlie Pickering I thought of how easy it is to look at the phone and check email. Text messages and the like or plug into music. I realised that it is easy to put on the radio, a CD or Bluetooth my phone in the car and fill the space and time with sound and distraction. What would it mean to drive in silence, pondering, wrestling, reflecting with thoughts, ideas or allowing the silence to resound in my ears. I know why it is harder to sit in silence and that is because I might be challenged to think about things that aren't easy. I might be confronted with ideas and doubts, questions that push me into unknown places that challenge my assumptions. In the silence I am confronted with my own vulnerability and insignificance in this immeasurably huge universe. In the silence I come face to face with my own humanness.

As I walk quietly through the local bushland and along the creek paths, I find that my being and spirit is restored and the things that seem very important in the daily news or in life in this society suddenly have less imperative. The materialism that surrounds me suddenly doesn't seem as important. Nor do the people of power or fame who seem so impressive on the nightly news or other media. I am drawn down into the place where people struggle and wonder whether we are so very different – they and me with different colour skin or culture, race, gender, sexuality, or even religious faith or none. Isn't there something about being human that binds us? Aren't we all held in some deep and profound relationship in the Divine Heart? Doesn't God love all God's children in the same way (or deeper than) I love mine?

These thoughts echoed around in my mind as I read the story of Jesus in Matthew 4 for this first week of Lent. It is the story of Jesus temptations in the wilderness. 40 days and nights echoes Moses on the mountain receiving the law. '40' echoes the various points where this number appears as a time of preparation of God's people through the Bible – Noah, Moses, the people in the wilderness... Jesus spends this time fasting and praying, presumably allowing the daemons of life to have their way and flounce around in his head to distract and distort his vision and dreams, his calling and purpose. When the silence screams out threatening to drive us mad or lead us into depression or doubt or confusion, as it did with Jesus, he faces the daemons with renewed focus and calm spirit. He is not distracted by temptation to hold to the status quo and leave everything be. In his physical hunger Jesus is drawn into faith and faithfulness that is open to what is deeply and profoundly true – that God is! God is the heart of all things and holds all things in gracious love but humans and their institutions may not necessarily agree. Those who benefit from how things are never want to change and the status quo asserts its gentle tenacity of resistance. Jesus will not be deterred in wilderness of city. He has a focus grounded in God's way and forged in wilderness silence and undistracted listening. It sees people and looks through the mirage of social expectation to the face and way of Divine life live out in this world. He follows in faithful joy, wonder and hope.

I wonder what it might mean for us to stop and listen in the silence in this season of Lent? What would it mean for you to stop for a few moments in the day and reflect, listen, look or pray? I wonder what you might discover about yourself, the world and God? I wonder how different our world would be if we all stopped to listen in silence?