

## Reflection Notes – 12/3/17

- Geoff Stevenson

### **The Yearning Spirit Wandering in Darkness...**

I've been pondering a story. It is about a leader, a religious-political leader in his time; a wise and responsible person presumably. He is described as being in the dark. He lurks in the darkness and walks around at night. In the story this seems to be a metaphor for his own ignorance and that of the status quo he represents.

A leader who is in the dark; who doesn't actually know what everyone believes and hopes he knows. Now that seems far-fetched in our world doesn't it? As we listen to the political and other leaders around us, we wonder what is going on. There is a sense of confusion, chaos and of in-fighting between members of the same parties. The rise and rise of Trump left everyone, including his own party, scratching their heads. He blathers around offering sound bites that often show marketing prowess and a salesman's skill but are devoid of anything of depth. There is a superficiality about Donald and his ilk. They speak the right words to engage the disenfranchised and fearful but their rhetoric rings hollow and without real understanding. There seem to be a lot of leaders walking in the darkness of a world that is in transition, changing as rapidly as each new generation of computer, mobile phone or other device. It seems that we change leaders as often as we change devices, looking for an upgrade, one that can engage the new world and set us upon the right path.

I read the story of the leader in the darkness, wandering with some sense of aimless uncertainty, searching for the path that will be life-giving and I thought of myself. I too, often walk in darkness seeking the path of liberation and life amidst the distorted realities of modern life. Sometimes it all seems smoke and mirrors, a carnival of options that entertain, confuse, draw you in, promise the world and leave you bloated on junk food that smelled good but sits heavily in your stomach, filling your veins with fat. You realise that your wallet is less heavy and you have nothing to show for it. Life is often a mirage that feels real and right but quickly disappears leaving a desert reality of dry longing.

I suppose that whilst ever I find distractions I live in a world of colour much like the pretend world of the Matrix, behind which is a deep and strained reality that is a battle ground of forces seeking to control. It is in the moments when the darkness draws around and I begin to see that 'what is' may not be all that it seems. The promise of prosperity and upward mobility looks good and sucks us all in. If only we have more we will be happier. The more we accumulate the better life will be and the more we will prove ourselves as successful and worthwhile. But it is a farce that has us in its death-grip as we all spiral downwards using up mother earth's resources at an alarming rate and alienating ourselves from one another in our increasingly isolated living.

Who benefits from all this? As we hurtle along in the slipstream of technological revolution and economic growth, striving for the latest gadget or toy we lay stress upon stress. We have achieved a pandemic of stress and distress, alienation from people, except the few that are part of the inner circles of our life, and a state where anxiety, depression and sadness has overwhelmed large slabs of our society. There is a healthiness of depression, according to M. Scott Peck (of 'The Road Less Travelled' fame). He says that

sometimes depression arises when we walk into the darkness and see the world for what it is and feel a deep sadness for the struggle and suffering of those who can't compete in the marketplace of economic beneficence. He doesn't say it quite like that but that is the essence. There is a sadness that overwhelms those who stop long enough to look and see and feel the pain of human despair. We feel helpless before it.

I heard statistics last night that the number of people who commit suicide is twice that who die on the roads in Australia and 7 people per hour attempt suicide. Why, if all is as good as we want to believe and are told, is this so? Why the desperation and loneliness? Why the silence over this? If the road toll increased marginally there would be massive advertising and a blitz on speed, alcohol, seatbelts, fatigue...

A religious-political leader wandered in the darkness. He was one who should 'know' but recognised that he didn't. He went to the Light in the night to find wisdom. He went to one who did things that amazed people and though his words had the real power for life, they marvelled more at the signs and wonders that accompanied him. This leader went to find out what was and could be in a world that was not all it seemed. U2 sang that they 'Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For' and Nicodemus, the religious leader, was looking for something when he went to Jesus in the night (see John 3:1-17).

Jesus told him that wisdom and life came from a renewal of heart and mind, of being born again or born from above. This phrase, used and abused, means to be renewed in your mind and heart from beyond yourself – from God's grace. Eyes open and hearts change. Ears hear the cries and wills become steeled towards a new way. Jesus spoke of wind and Spirit (they share the same root work in Greek) and in the same way that wind blows freely wherever it will, so it is with the Spirit. God's Spirit blows through creation renewing and sustaining, creating and bringing new life. The Spirit of God within and through humans brings the capacity for life and profound wonder. The same stirring inspiration can also be used for personal greed and gain or the abuse of power. This is the darkness of human life that also surrounds us, into which we walk and feel its oppressive powers suck life from us. As Nicodemus sought life in this one, Jesus, so we in our deepest beings yearn for the freedom to be; to live with fullness and hope in community with others who share the journey of life together. We know that the adage 'The one who dies with the most toys wins' is as empty as the lives of so many who have lost their way, drowning in wealth and wallowing in despair. Howard Hughes, Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, and the plethora of stars who departed this mortal coil in recent years, many far too early. Loneliness and despair surrounded their last drug-addled days or quiet desperation that tipped them over the edge. The more we have the more we are owned by the stuff of our lives and the darkness coalesces around us until the Spirit blows through us with renewed life, hope, joy and peace in life with others, a community of gracious living!

The other story I have pondered is about the founding figure of the 3 mono-theistic faiths (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), Abraham. It comes from Genesis 12 and tells of Abraham encountering God who tells him to pack up everything and journey into the unknown. He is given a direction but no destination and the only assurance is God is with him and will tell him when he arrives. Abraham packs up everything and wanders into the unknown future. With simplicity of life and the uncertain assuredness of faith he goes and discovers God-presence in the journey of faith and life. This is a story for our time!

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?