

Reflection Notes – 19/3/17

- *Geoff Stevenson*

Drinking Deeply From the Water of Life

I remember reading a story about some explorers travelling down the west coast of the Southern American continent. Their journey had been delayed and they couldn't find a place to set ashore to stock up on things they needed. Their water supply was running extremely low and ran out. Sailors on the ship were dying of thirst. They were a little way out to sea and surrounded by an immense ocean but the salt water was no good to drink and slowly they died. The sad reality of this story is that as the sailors were dying aboard their ship they were crossing the mouth of the mighty Amazon River that delivered billions of litres of fresh water into the ocean with such force that they were actually surrounded by fresh water that was drinkable. That which they needed and craved was actually all around them but they didn't realise it.

I wonder how this is a metaphor for the world around and that perhaps we are all on a ship floating through the ocean, thirsty, hungry and yearning. All around is water but it seems salty and unpalatable. In the movie, Bruce Almighty, Bruce receives the powers of God after complaining that God isn't doing God's job and isn't looking after Bruce's interests. After fixing a few things on his own behalf Bruce begins to hear voices in his head and they fill his mind – lots of voices. He calls out to God who says they are only prayers and he should answer them because they will only keep coming. Bruce turns them into post-it notes but there are thousands, millions and they fill a room. So he converts them to emails and there are an equally large number. He reads a few and they are filled with the broad range of human need and desire. There are the people who are self-obsessed and greedy, concerned only with what they want and expect they deserve. Then there are the diversity of human yearning and depth of struggle and pain. People are lonely and alienated from friends, family and community. There are those struggling with chronic and debilitating illness of body or mind. There are those who are heartbroken and grieving and others filled with guilt or shame. There are people who have lost their way and are depressed and hopeless and others caught in the spirals of addictions. There are people from every place and we are all together in this ship of life floating on an ocean broad, deep and hostile – or so it seems.

Bruce ultimately answers these prayers by saying 'yes' to everyone and unleashes havoc upon his small part of the world as incompatible hopes, wants and needs are granted to everyone. God catches up with him in the chaos and he confesses that he just gave everyone what they wanted. 'Since when do people always know what they really need?' God asks. Bruce shakes his head in recognition that he doesn't really know what he needs. In the story he goes to the realisation that what he thought he wanted and needed is not actually what he really wants. Fame, fortune, recognition, a bigger home, a successful career are not the basis of well-being (or even happiness). There is a relationship of love and sharing of life. There is engagement with other people and an understanding of the diversity of people around us, learning to look upon each person as a human being. There is a spirituality that needs to be part of who we are because we are spiritual beings and some of our yearning is for deeper meaning at this level.

I wonder if we are looking in the right places as a society for that which we really need to find deep peace and joy in this world and the life we are gifted? I wonder if we understand that all around us are the things we need to live fully this life we have? Instead of living in fear or feeling threatened by those we don't understand or who are different or afraid we don't have enough stuff and are being left behind such that we will suffer and be unhappy, perhaps we need to hear another story – one of life.

I read another story, a beautiful story filled with complexity and wonder this week. It is from John's Gospel and is the story of Jesus meeting a woman, a Samaritan, at a well and engaging in a conversation that opens up life and breaks down barriers. It felt like being in that boat floating in an ocean filled with water from the Amazon River flowing out and surrounding the ship. I dive overboard and there is refreshing water, drinkable and fresh, filled with life and I drink deeply of it.

The story is set in a traditional place where courtships happen, the well. Ancient stories abound with tales of husbands and wives to be meeting at wells and going through rituals of discerning appropriateness of marriage. A woman comes for water for her family at a time when other women have been and gone. There is a suggestion she may be an outcast, living in a life of dubious morality. At the well Jesus engages her in conversation, treading on many taboos in the process – he ought not speak to a woman alone unless he is a relative. As a Jew he shouldn't be speaking to a Samaritan, with whom there is deep division, conflict and even hatred. There are barriers of race, religion and gender erected by a society that divided people and shut each other out when there was difference. Sounds like our society really, with our plethora of divisions, suspicions and barriers, real and assumed.

Jesus broke through the barriers to listen to this woman and engage her deep need and yearning, her alienation, shame and need. He offered her living water, a metaphor for that which comes from God and provides a deep quenching of inner thirst – thirst for life, hope, love, peace, joy and spiritual vitality. God offers water and food for living that will feed our deep yearning and bring people together into a community of caring, love and grace. Jesus transcends the particularities of Jewish faith and that of the Samaritan faith that had Jewish background and competed for truth. God is bigger than either faith and bigger than those who practice faith and proclaim exclusive ways. God is bigger than the differences between people and conflict, fighting and discrimination will never yield peace or life. The water of life runs freely all around us to drink in abundance and find the space to love, care, welcome and include. When barriers fall people find life and we all find our way into community. There will be disagreements but we can learn to focus on the bigger things that bind us and working together for the sake of the world is a wonderful calling and vision.

In the story of Bruce, he discovered a community at the end where everyone had a place in the party and enjoyed togetherness. There were people of all backgrounds and capacities. Jesus left the woman rushing back to town to tell everyone what she experienced and who she had encountered. This somewhat outcast woman found her way back into life and her neighbours and family found their way into God's race – they discovered the living water that was readily available everywhere around them. What about us? Do we yearn for the living water that will refresh our souls?