

Reflection Notes – 30/4/17

- *Geoff Stevenson*

The Mysterious Presence that is God!

Some years ago Susan and I were invited to a celebration dinner for some friends in our congregation. I can't remember the actual event – a significant birthday or other milestone. The dinner was more formal and we were seated at a table with a couple of people we knew and several we didn't. The conversation flowed around general topics as happens in such circumstances, as people work one another out. Through the evening conversation revolved around a particular couple's son. He seemed to be a well-known person as there were comments about media and the like. As I listened in I had the sense I should know who this person was but couldn't quite put it all together. The stories were interesting but I couldn't quite work out who it was until a point where someone said something and everything clicked into place. I suddenly realised who it was they were talking about and even remembered previous conversations with the guests of honour about this person. It was just one comment or observation that brought everything into focus and clicked for me.

There have been several times when I have seen or been in the presence of 'celebrities', the well-known faces of stage, screen or sporting field. There was the time, years ago, when we were walking along the city footpath and mum noticed Paul Hogan crossing the street. He looked different, without the TV make up and his usual odd TV attire. We had to closely and it was in some distinct gestures or movement that really gave him away. Often it is only in the gesture, the walk, the nod of the head or the sideways glance that confirms our suspicion or overcomes our confused wondering – is this someone we do or should know?

In other situations I have felt or sensed the presence of someone in the words, gestures or actions of another. An experience of one person opens up a whole memory of someone else and the words of both meld into a common language of meaning. Sometimes I am drawn out of myself and this present experience into something deeper and more profound. Some years ago a group of us were leading a service at a local nursing home. In the middle of a hymn staff moved to one of the residents, an elderly man who had never been involved and, I later discovered, hadn't spoken for some time. This day during one of the hymns he began to sing and the staff were amazed and called each other to come and listen. Something drew him out of his silence, probably taking him back into another era of life and loosened a memory that became real and present and broke through his dark, silent world.

This is the story of a couple of disciples or followers of Jesus in our story this week (Luke 24:13-35). They were walking away from Jerusalem to their home village. Along the way they were joined by this mysterious figure who was able to talk to them about all the events of Jerusalem, events that had grieved the, scared them and turned life upside down. It is in such situations where an unexpected, sudden event changes everything we know and understand that we are left bewildered, afraid, confused and lost. We don't know where to turn or what to do and we have to pull ourselves together and struggle to find a way forward into a new place in life.

These two people were wrestling with life that has taken a new direction, one that seems less than anything we expected. They cannot fathom why things happened as they did. Why would Jesus be killed? He preached love, peace, justice, inclusive community and that God reached out to all people to embrace them into Divine love and grace. Jesus was not only a good person but holy, profound and the most deeply spiritual person they had ever encountered. Why would Jerusalem leaders have him killed? Why would Rome be concerned about this vulnerable, simple Rabbi? How could God let this happen, for surely God was in this one!??

As they walked they were joined by another figure who asked questions and then responded to their grief and confusion. He put everything together to demonstrate how God's ways are deep, true and wondrous but also thwarted by humans who lust after power and wealth and use violence to get their way. The words of this one held them captive and opened their fearful minds to new possibilities despite their grief. The one they met went to move on but was invited into their home and they sat down to eat. The stranger took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to the couple. Their eyes were suddenly opened and they knew the presence of Jesus in this mysterious guest. They knew Jesus in the breaking of bread within this household community. They knew him in this present moment in their midst.

For Luke's community living nearly 6 decades after Jesus' death this story provides a living testimony to the presence of God, the Spirit of Christ, in our midst as we gather together and engage in life together. In the midst of life, with all its struggles, joy and pain, God is present, embracing us into a web of love and grace. It is when life throws up the puzzling, difficult and impossible questions and we wrestle together through tears or grief that God is a comforting, mysterious presence in our midst. We can't always define or even understand how God comes to us. Sometimes it is in the people we meet or who come to us and offer gracious words or comfort. Sometimes it is in the gentle licking of the puppy or the wonderful aroma and beauty of the unfolding flower or the bird song and wonder of the local creek flowing through the local bush. Sometimes the sunrise or sunset, the moon and stars and the world in all its beauty that cries out God's name in the nature-song of praise. Sometimes a story, a movie, and always in a shared meal where bread is broken and wine is shared.

The story of Emmaus is the story of God-presence that comes to us in mystifying, mysterious and wondrous ways to embrace the world in a love that sets us free from the bonds of grief, greed, violence and hopelessness that seems to pervade so much life. We are invited into a new way of being that is communal, relational and life-giving for all people. It is about love, generosity, justice, hope and peace. It is for all people and it is the Easter Story of promise!

One commentator suggests that Emmaus never happened but always happens. It isn't a story we should relegate to history and leave 'back there.' It doesn't work as a 'proof text' for resurrection either. It must live and be the story we know and live and embrace within our lives. As we gather around a table to eat and talk, laugh and cry, plan and work, God is present and in our midst. This mysterious God cajoles us into deeper life that is richer and filled with joy, inclusive community and justice for all. It is a way of love that works for the well-being of all and the common good of the world.