

Reflection Notes – 28/5/17

- Geoff Stevenson

What is Eternal Life?

We walked our dogs today. We went around the local parkland along the creek. The little young one ran all over the place – as far as his lead would allow. The older, bigger fellow sauntered along for the most part, slower up hill and faster down. Along the way either or both stopped and sniffed, sniffed, sniffed. They walked in circles sniffing, licking, scratching. What were they looking for? What smell attracted them? What was there in or beneath the grass? Sometimes these sojourns off the path sent them into a frenzy of scurrying back and forth in search of something. Occasionally I could see some item of food left behind and realised this was what they were seeking – it is usually food!! Other times I could see nothing and the dogs seemed to find nothing but still they searched until I pulled them away. They walked on reluctantly. I wonder what they were looking for? I wonder what smells or scents attracted them and sent them into a frenzy?

I wandered through Parramatta the other day on my way to the dentist. People scurried every which way, much like the dogs. Some rushed in particular directions and others lingered before store windows ogling items on display. Some people looked longingly, dreamily yearning for something or other that would make them happy... Some people looked distracted, even lost. Some looked like they wanted to be anywhere else but on their way to work.

I wonder what it is that people are looking for. What is it that makes people pursue various options in life? Why do people seek larger and larger houses for example? What is it that makes us pursue wealth and prosperity? What is behind the drive for power and control over others? Or the desire for celebrity or feelings of importance? What really lies behind our addictive lifestyles and our obsessions? I wonder what it is that lures people into alcoholic stupor or drug-addicted highs – then lows and the compulsive behaviour of serious addiction that may follow. I heard the story of a person I once knew who became lost in an ice-fuelled obsession and ended up in a psychiatric hospital to dry out and get other aspects of his life in order. What drives us to seek some of the things we do and why do we humans so often make such superficial choices?

There also seems to be a strong pull towards immortality, to being immortal. In the young there is the sense that we are indestructible and some young people do all manner of dangerous things, seemingly challenging death. There are older people who have their bodies frozen very soon after death and pay enormous amounts so that they might be brought back to life in years to come. They pay huge sums to try and cheat death. The lust for immortality is a theme in stories and movies. The Harry Potter series deals with the immortal desires of Voldemort, the personification of evil. He takes over mortals and lives off them to keep himself alive. Such themes are common. Some seek immortality through what they do – leaving something that keeps their name alive beyond their life. For some it is an achievement, others a legacy. All religions seem to have some sense of life after the grave and in some more than others the focus is on the afterlife. The ancient Egyptians, for example, went to extreme lengths to prepare their Pharaohs and families for life beyond the mortal world. The extreme measures they went to in building enormous

pyramids and the extraordinary craftsmanship in these buildings is incredible. Immortality and life beyond death is deeply embedded within the human being.

In some forms Christian faith often focuses predominantly on eternal life and how to get there. In some places I have experienced more focus on death and beyond than life now. For many Christians getting people into heaven when we die is the sole purpose and mission of the church. There are all manner of rules, beliefs, doctrines, procedures and expectations that different groups of Christians determine that people must adhere to in order to live eternally. Eternal life is big business in some parts and has managed to remove us from this world even before death.

So it is that I come to the Gospel reading for this week (John 17:1-11) and as I read I was surprised to hear Jesus' words about eternal life. He says: *'And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.'* Eternal life, according to John's Jesus, is that we know God. It isn't knowing about or believing certain things about God. It isn't something that will be after we die (although possibly includes something of that in John's intent) but is for now. In this time and place we can know the reality of eternal life – we can know God.

In this prayer of Jesus, from which this verse comes, he yearns for unity between the human and the Divine, God and humans. John speaks of the unity of Jesus and God and this becomes the metaphor for unity between humans and God and in this unity of life, experience and being we know God and therefore eternal life. In other places John's Jesus speaks of the vine and branches, of how the branches on the vine are integrally connected to the main vine from which comes life through the flow of nutrient. God is the vine and we the branches that are intimately connected into this vine. Those branches cut off from the flow of nutrient die and are pruned. It is an image that is challenging and confronting but real.

In this understanding God is not an external being in the sky separate from and removed from life and people and the earth but intimately and intricately involved. God is the essence of life itself. God is that which sustains, animates, inspires life in all its forms. The Biblical stories speak of God breathing life into the human (originating from humus, soil, dirt – the earth-man) and animating humans with life, spirit and being. Other stories speak of the reanimation of dead communities and nations, of people lost and oppressed through liberation and new possibilities. This breath animates and gives essential life. It is like the wind that blows where it will, the air we breathe in and are immersed within as we live our lives. This air is essential for life and the atmosphere in which we live makes life possible – God is in and around us like air we breathe, sustaining us with life.

The eternal life of which Jesus speaks is living in the full and growing awareness, realisation and experience of the reality of God in, through and around us. It leads us into the awareness of the interconnectedness of all things because all exists in God. We begin to imagine and appreciate life from new and different perspectives. There are new perceptions as we ponder the world around and the people who inhabit the earth – not just in our part but across this wondrous earth. We are all connected in God who holds all things in grace and love. The awareness of God's presence and the acceptance that we are in God is expressed in love, justice, peace and hope as we reorient our lives towards God and the way of God revealed in Jesus' life, teaching and mission. This is eternal life!