

Reflection Notes – 4/6/17

- Geoff Stevenson

Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things!

There is a story in Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled* that tells the following story:

A thirty-five year old remarkably successful businessman came to see me because of a mild neurosis. He was born illegitimate, and through infancy and early childhood was raised solely by his mother who was both deaf and dumb, in the slums of Chicago. When he was five the state, believing that no such mother was competent to raise a child, took him away without warning or explanation and placed him in a succession of three foster homes, where he was treated to rather routine indignities and with a total absence of affection. At the age of fifteen he became partially paralysed as a result of a rupture of a congenital aneurysm of one of the blood vessels in his brain. At sixteen he left his final set of foster parents and began living by himself. Predictably, at the age of seventeen he was jailed for a particularly vicious and meaningless assault. He received no psychiatric treatment in jail.

Upon his release, after six months of boring confinement, the authorities got him a job as a menial stock-room clerk in a rather ordinary company. No psychiatrist or social worker in the world would have foreseen his future as anything but grim. Within three years, however, he had become the youngest department head in the history of the company. In five years, after marrying another executive, he left the company and eventually succeeded in his own business, becoming a relatively wealthy man. By the time he entered treatment with me he had in addition become a loving and effective father, a self-educated intellectual, a community leader and an accomplished artist. How, when, why, where did all of this come about? Within the ordinary concepts of causality, I do not know. Together we were able to trace with exactitude, within the normal framework of cause and effect, the determinants of his mild neurosis and heal him. We were not able in the slightest degree determine the origins of his unpredictable successes.

Scott Peck goes on to discuss the mystery of people's lives. Why do some people cope with incredible set-backs in life? How do all of us deal with the traumas and trials life throws up, the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of life? He speaks of a 'force' that seems to operate routinely in most people to protect and nurture reasonable mental health through their life. As his discussion continues he points to the mystery of grace in people's lives. As a scientist (psychiatrist) he can't define grace or this mysterious force operating on people in more complete terms. He can't describe what it is, how it works or why it does what it does. He can only marvel that what shouldn't happen, so often does happen and something seems to lie behind it, regardless of people's faith or belief systems. This thing he calls 'grace' doesn't reside only within those who profess a particular faith or type of faith but is revealed across the human race.

When Peck begins to speak as a person of faith he understands this mysterious force arising from the source of life, of all being – that which we call God. He quotes the well-known hymn, *Amazing Grace* and points to this beautiful hymn's words as the mystery that pervades human life and works in people's lives even when we are not aware of it. Through grace, ordinary people do extraordinary things!

Peck's discussion remains more psychological than theological but often moves between the two. When I read the story of the man and heard from his psychiatrist that there is no logical explanation for his well-being, but some deep and mysterious in the human spirit that arises from beyond and works with and through to bring well-being, I thought of the story that will be read through churches across the world this Sunday. It is called the story of Pentecost because it takes place at the Jewish Festival of Pentecost – the Festival of Weeks (a week of weeks after Passover – our Easter).

The story speaks of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem waiting for something to happen, the promise of Jesus, whatever that might be. As they read and prayed the room they were in was filled with wind and tongues like fire appeared around and over them and they began to speak in other languages. It is a wonderful, provocative story. It has fostered all manner of expectation in religious communities as people live in expectation of this story happening in their lives now. Sometime we literalise these stories so much that we miss the vital points and power they offer. There are so many levels and layers to this story that, for the early church, take them to a new place. For the church of Luke, writing in the 80's of the 1st century, it is a powerful story to drive them in confident hope that God has not abandoned them and left them alone in the big, scary, violent world. The little church, represented by a relatively small group of followers is filled with the power of God's Spirit that comes like wind, blowing where it will, or fire that purifies. The story is in some ways a reversal of the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 where people sought to build a tower into the heavens where God(s) to become gods in themselves. In that story it is said that God confused the languages and dispersed the people across the earth. In the Pentecost story all the world hears God's love proclaimed in the language of their heart and passion. The little church is encouraged to proclaim God's love to all the world!

Hidden within the story is the wonderful mystery of ordinary, even afraid and weak, people overcoming their vulnerabilities and fear and standing strong in the world. They speak out in courageous ways of how God's love is revealed in and through people's lives. They witness to the life and love of God revealed in Jesus and his ministry of compassion, inclusion, justice and peace. They become the people they can be rather than being diminished by fear and uncertainty. These ordinary men and women begin to do extraordinary things because they are suddenly open and embracing this mysterious force that comes upon them and works in and through them. This mysterious force we call the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit that is creative and nurturing. This is the Spirit that hovered over the chaos in the beginning and brought order; the Spirit that breathed into the people formed from dust and animated them into life. This is the Spirit of God that permeates our world and being with creative power and love. This is the power that moves people to deeper love and compassion, acts of mercy and justice, reconciliation and peacemaking. This is the power of God that is not coercive but invitational, nurturing, comforting and grounded in the deepest, purest love. This is the love of God that holds all things in deep relationship and animates all life.

When we are open through whatever means to this powerful force love, we are lifted to new possibilities in love, grace, peace, justice, inclusion and reaching out to each other as a community of hope in the world. The man in the story embraced the potential of love that was in him and grew in his capacity to be a loving and loved human being!