

Reflection Notes – 9/7/17

- Geoff Stevenson

Losing Our Religion to Live Jesus' Way!

There's a story of a young man who graduated with a PhD in English Literature and went on to teach graduate courses in an American University. He loved the literature he read and studied – the classics, great novels and poetry through the ages. He was filled with passion and enthusiasm and poured it out into his classes. One Monday morning, though, he just quit and walked away for it all.

His mother was rightly worried about him, that he had lost his mind and given up a wonderful career. In her anxiety she asked a pastor friend would he have a chat with her son and try to talk some sense into him – at very least ensure he was alright. The pastor rang and they made a time to meet.

When he arrived at the young man's apartment, it was loaded with books – poetry, novels, texts. The apartment was modern and comfortable and they sat down with a coffee to chat. The pastor asked how he was going, wondering how to really broach the subject but the young man had already guessed what this was about. He said, 'you're here to check up on me aren't you?'

'Well, your mother is concerned and asked if I'd have a chat with you but I promise I'm not here to badger you into anything – just chat. Tell me: what happened?'

'Well I graduated filled with passion and only ever wanted to teach others what I'd discovered, to give them the same joy, wonder and wisdom I'd found in these classics. I taught every class with as much energy and passion as I could. I prepared well and gave it everything and for a time it was good. I loved it. Then I realised that the students didn't really appreciate what I was teaching. They would ask questions like: Is this bit in the exams? Do we have to read and learn this poem?'

'A little part of me died with each question and every class I seemed to leave a little more of me behind. They drained me. It got so bad that one Monday morning I walked into the Academic Dean's office and handed him my letter of resignation. I told him I was leaving. He tried to talk me out of it but I wasn't changing my mind. He threatened me that I would never find another job in a university but I don't really care. That's it.'

The pastor sat back, understanding something of the young man's story for he had taught classes in college and knew the struggle the young man had experienced. He said, 'I understand what you're saying but what will you do now? You will need a job.'

'I have a job. I'm a postman and have a daily run around the district. It's different and not too bad.'

'Well I suppose that you are the most over-qualified postman – a PhD postman. There wouldn't be too many of them. Maybe you can be the very best postman around?'

'Actually I'm lousy. We all go out about 9:00 and the others all arrive back by 3:00. I'm lucky to get back by 4:30-5:00. Most nights I find it hard to get to sleep and I'm often tired through the day.'

The pastor looked confused. 'Why are you so late and so tired?'

'Well, as I walk around I talk to the people I meet as I put mail into their boxes and gradually they have told me their stories, their news and I stop to listen. I have

discovered that the people on my route have all manner of grief, pain, struggle, hopes and joys. I have been able to give them wisdom from the great writers of our culture. There is always a poem or story to share and, of course they give me a coffee. It is really hard to sleep when you've drunk 20 cups of coffee each day. I've found that my love of literature is really valued by the people I serve and I can share all the things I've loved with them and it seems to make a difference – and I'm happy, content.'

The pastor smiled and encouraged the young man. They finished the conversation and he left, feeling satisfied that this young man had found his place in life.

I like this story because it goes against most of what we are told about ambition, good jobs, money, status and so on. It makes me wonder how many people are living their lives through the expectations of others – society, friends, family... It makes me wonder about the world in which we live that puts so much pressure on people to be *something*, *someone*, whatever that might mean. We often forego satisfaction, meaning and joy for practicality that may never really mean anything. We give ourselves over to ideologies, expectations and processes that seem to deny us life and slowly crush life out of us while there is a radiant and wonderful world all around us.

In our story from Matthew's Gospel this week (Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30) we hear Jesus speaking out against religion and religious people who are so obsessed with their religion they fail to see the God at its heart. Whether it is the solemn and passionate John the Baptist who comes with fiery preaching and prophetic words or the Jesus who is life-giving, reaching out to all inviting everyone to the feast of joy and wonder, these religious people reject them all. They are so intense on what is right, on the legal requirements, the belief system and a rigid set of expectation that they fail to see or hear the words of joy, wonder and love that transcends their religion and brings freedom. They fail to embrace another way. They are filled with angst and an intensity that stifles life and joy. Their religion becomes a grind and God is lost somewhere else where there is a bit of fun, joy, food and where people wrestle with life in all its joy, wonder, struggle and pain.

At the end of the passage Jesus invites his listeners to come and rest if they are tired and weary, to learn a new way that is life-giving and hopeful. He insists that he has a way that will give life to their beings and relieve them of the deep stress and struggle they experience in trying to toe the line of societal, religious (and corporate, political...) expectations. It is a different way, a way of love and grace, of forgiveness and mercy, of justice and peace, of community and working together for the well-being of all people. His way embraces others into a community of hope and love that is inclusive and engaging. It is a different way – the way of life.

The PhD Postman, for me, had the courage to leave the rat race that was consuming him. He walked away from the world he had believed in and passionately engaged when he realised it was killing his spirit, his being his self. He found a place where people yearned for the hope and life his knowledge of literature could fill. He shared with them and they with him in a kind of community across a neighbourhood and everyone found richer life together. The story finishes by saying that on his birthday all the neighbourhood gathered in a local hall and threw him a party. They celebrated their PhD postman whose love and passion had touched their lives and the community was very real. This is something Jesus would do. It is a story of life, hope, love and joy!