

Reflection Notes – 30/7/17

- *Geoff Stevenson*

What Do I Really, Really Want???

Have you ever had your heart set on something, something to buy, an adventure to experience, something you really wanted to do, have, achieve...? If/when you got there, how was it? Did it live up to your hopes and expectations? Did you get what you thought you wanted and did it meet your anticipated desires?

Sometimes the things I have really wanted have lived up to some level of my anticipation. Other times I have been really excited when I got whatever it was I had yearned and it was great for '5 minutes' and then the magic wore off. I have sometimes found that the 'fun' is in the buying or planning and preparing. The research and exploring, the seeking price comparisons and comparing brands are sometimes more satisfying than the end product – not always but sometimes.

When we have upgraded our car, it has been exciting and anticipated. The first drives are great fun and it is exciting to explore the new gadgets that weren't in the old one. It feels more comfortable, is more reliable, looks better. It is a better car and we looked forward to getting it after making the decision. Soon the car settles into the normal practical context of life and becomes the means of us moving from one place to another. I have no increased enduring happiness for having it. My life hasn't taken on a whole new meaning and soon the ordinary ups and downs of life, the normal events predominate.

I often wonder what it is that I/we really want. I wonder what need or desire really lies behind the hopes and dreams that people have. I wonder what it is that people who aspire to great power really want and need and whether having untold power will create meaning and joy in their life. I wonder whether achieving great wealth, as many people seek, will provide ongoing joy, purpose and contentment. Certainly there are many stories of people coming into great wealth and living it up for some time, doing all they ever (and never) dreamed of but finding no real ongoing satisfaction – more comfort and ease perhaps but not more happiness or joy.

I wonder what it is we really do want and, more so, what we need. What would make my life richer, fuller, more meaningful and joyful? What is it that is intrinsically required for me to be fulfilled and whole in my being? I push this question further and ask what it is that the society around me really wants. There is so much toing and froing, of seeking this, that or the other in the pursuit of happiness but I don't always find great joy present in the midst of all the wealth we have. For a society that is wealthier than ever before, that has access to more knowledge, travel, technology and wealth than any previous generation we also have a great deal of anxiety, depression, mental health issues, loneliness, isolation, fear and so on. Do people around me seem happier, in general, than 30, 40 or 50 years ago? I can't really see much difference except that back then there was possibly more and deeper sense of community and connection. I suspect we knew more people around us and probably felt a lower level of stress. Certainly there was less pressure on people and the expectations weren't as intense – especially young people and education levels. I wonder whether everyone is happier in their larger houses on smaller blocks with less time spent in the garden and more interaction through screens and technology.

I also wonder what people across the world really want. What do those who come as refugees really want - and need? What do terrorists really want and need? What do those who are antisocial, violent and abusive really want and need? What do those who exist on either side of the multitude of conflicts, large and small, all around us really want and need? What do we, as we journey through life, really want and need? I suspect that what I think I want may not always be what I seek deeper down, that which I need in my deepest being. Sometimes I think that what I truly yearn for is deeper than what I think I really want. There is something that is deeper, richer and more fulfilling than the more superficial realities that often dominate my life and desires. I wonder if it requires a crisis to reset my awareness of what life is about and what is really important for my growth and well-being, my contentment and joy.

Various events of late (people struggling with intense illness, funerals, talking to people about important issues in their lives – hurts, hopes...) remind me that life is often lived in different places. For some life breaks open and exposes the lies of a superficial world that yearns for more wealth or power, sex or material satisfaction. They live in the place of deep and profound questions and struggle which become the crucible of transformation, life and emersion into a deeper place of engagement and living. Others slide across the surface of life in the slipstream of desire or excess or desperate hope for more. They are continually seeking and searching out the next acquisition, the next experience, the next conquest or achievement or sense of acclaim and celebrity. Some are simply desperate for what others have and the happiness they perceive must lie behind the walls of the big and expensive houses or board rooms or places of wealth and power.

What do we really desire? Do we know? This week I am challenged in these questions by some simple stories Jesus tells in Matthew 13. One is of a man who sells everything he has to acquire a field with treasure in it. Another man, a pearl merchant, goes in search of fine pearls. When he finds one he sells everything he has to purchase it. These stories are set in the context of describing the Reign or presence of God that is more valuable than anything else, such that in selling all we have to gain it, we don't need anything else. These are strange words to the ears of a material world. They are strange words to a society that places such value and importance on what we possess and what we have in material terms. Do we forfeit the spiritual for the material? Is the only food we value that which we put in our mouths? Do we need, at least in a small part, something deeper and richer than material stuff, alone? What is this Reign of God of which Jesus speaks, this reality that he places such great importance and value upon? Why would you and I consider that we need it more than all else when we need our daily bread, the strength to get through today and tomorrow, the roof over our heads, the clothes on our back – there are practical, material issues that confront us? Is it an either/or situation – either material well-being or spiritual well-being?

For me, Jesus points to a set of values, a way of being that brings all else into stark relief and clear understanding. I can't live on bread alone – I need it but I need much more. I need love, given and received, peace with myself and others, hope, justice, lived and received, I need a balanced life that isn't overwhelmed by stress and pressure. I need to live in a community that is inclusive and accepting, broad and diverse and I need to be delivered from the pervasive fear that overwhelms us. I am challenged by Jesus' stories.