Lent 3 Sermon delivered in the Parish of the Parks and shared with St Margaret Eltham 2022

Luke 13: 1-9

Today’s gospel can be viewed within the broader context of Jesus’ prophecies about the lack of ability of the crowds to read the signs of the times and a need to repent while they have the opportunity. On one level this is a gospel about repentance and judgement. This is a reading about taking stock of our life. We can do this self-examination knowing that God stands waiting for us to turn to him. Do I want to talk about God’s judgement or his unending love for us? I suppose this is really a decision about whether we see the glass half empty or half full. As one who watches for the movement of the Spirit within, I am going to focus on what I have noted in this last week and how I long for God’s love.

I finished last week with Daniel Oleary’s theme that it is the life beneath our life that carries the promise of our transformation. In his book *Learning To Pray*, James Martin states that when it comes to prayer, deep calls to deep. It is in the deepest part of our Self where the God seed is planted, that there is a call. The relevant question is; are we listening?

We are in a section of Luke’s gospel where Jesus uses metaphors to talk about himself and the message he brings. Why did Jesus use metaphors? Because it is this quality of language that makes his message dynamic and relevant to us here and now.

We all know about plants that bloom and some bring forward flowers and fruit that delight us. Jesus’ words could be locked down into specific exegesis. For example, who is the gardener or what can we expect in terms of God’s retribution for our sin. Alternatively, we can loose that mental constriction of interpretation and let the metaphor run wild!

The fig tree requires tending and good conditions and time. Do we need similar time? We do, and our time is undergirded by God’s love. When we take the journey of deep calling to deep, God is waiting for us.

This week I turned to Henry Nouwen for sustenance and found him talking about downward mobility and the spiritual life. To explain the qualities of this life he turns to the first chapter of the Letter of John. The author writes: We describe what was from the beginning, the word of life was revealed and we have seen it and testify to it and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father. The writer of this letter explains that our ministry, yours and mine, rests in Jesus Christ. The word made flesh. How are we to learn, grow and flourish in his Spirit?

Nouwen claims that it is personal encounter with the true experience of love that enables us.[[1]](#footnote-1) We have some work to do if we wish to grow. Last week I mentioned Ignatian approach to the Examen prayer[[2]](#footnote-2) where we are instructed to state our desire. One contemporary version uses this wording: I ask God for the grace to turn my whole being to him. A second statement goes I state my desire. I tell God what I want him to reveal to me.

So, how do we bear fruit? We do it by spiritual growth. Some part of that process may be painful because it requires us to open ourselves in vulnerability. In the words I shared from Daniel O’Leary last[[3]](#footnote-3) week, we have to be ready to learn the painful truth that what we do may remain superficial unless we seek change. In his words we need to seek the life beneath the life we live. This is the seed of transformation.

Our relationship with the Spirit is the essence of our discipleship. It is through the Spirit that we are lifted into the divine life itself and we receive new eyes to see, new ears to hear and new hands to touch.[[4]](#footnote-4) When insights, images and understandings arrive we are in the Spirit. These are the raw materials of spiritual work. It takes us down. Our transformation is a slow on-going process. At times it seems enigmatic. How do we grasp it when we are surrounded by real world images that bombard mind and emotions? We need to set time aside to talk with God about our experience. This is another step in the Ignatian Examen. Talk with God about what you are seeing and experiencing. If God doesn’t seem to answer or be present, ask yourself this question. What would God say to me if I could hear him now?

When it comes transformation Nouwen says this about what radical transformation brings to our life. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the qualities of our Lord himself and they reveal his presence in in the midst of a world torn apart by idolatry, envy, greed, sexual irresponsibility, war and other sin[[5]](#footnote-5). It isn’t hard for us to the difference between the upward pull of the world and the downward pull of Christ. And even in this time of hideous violence in our world and the graphic vision we see daily in the media, goodness, love, generosity and courage are on display. Our individual task is to work out what conflicting images mean for us and our growth.

What is in your struggle? What new thing might await? What might we need to let go of? In his book *Finding* *God In The Mess*[[6]](#footnote-6) Beautiful photographic reflections that keep bringing me back to God’s presence in the moment. God’s dynamic presence is in the word. The metaphors created by scripture are a life-giving well of his presence. Let’s read and pray and be dependant in the Spirit.

Nouwen states that if our ministry does not emerge from personal encounter, it soon becomes a tiring routine and a boring job. He explains that when the dynamic quality leaves our spiritual experience it degenerates to introspection and self-scrutiny.

He gives a helpful explanation of the cross. Our life in Christ and what we do in his name belong together and they form the two arms of the cross. The vertical is what we achieve reaching up to God and down into ourself and the horizontal is what we can do with our hands in this world. A wonderful way to think of the cross.

References

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1. Nouwen, H. The Selfless Way of Christ p 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thibodeaux, M. God’s Voice Within passim [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nouwen, H. Ibid p 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nouwen, H. Ibid p43 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nouwen, H. Ibid p44 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. McManus, B. Finding God In The Mess passim [↑](#footnote-ref-6)