

St Andrew's on The Terrace 1st Sunday in Lent, February 18 2018 Packing for the Journey

Readings for the Gathering

Exodus 12: 1-11 The Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbour, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire—with the head, legs and internal organs. Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover.

Gospel Luke 15: 11-20 The Parable of the Lost Son Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Contemporary reading from 'The Highest Intent of Tradition' by Brian McLaren in *Seeking Aliveness* (Hachette Book Gp, NY., 2017) If tradition could be compared to a road that began in the distant past and continues to the present, Jesus dares to propose that the road isn't finished yet. To extend the road of tradition into the future – to fulfil its potential –we must first look back to discern its general direction. Then, informed by the past, we must look forward and dare to step beyond where the road currently ends, venturing off the map, so to speak. To stop where the road of tradition currently ends, Jesus realises, would actually end the adventure and bring the tradition to a standstill. So faithfulness doesn't simply allow us to extend the tradition and seek to fulfil its unexplored potential; it *requires* us to do so.

Reflection:

What did Brian McLaren say? "Look forward and dare to step beyond where the road currently ends." But, how to pack if you're walking where no one's ever walked before?

My brother recently talked with an old friend for whom the tradition has run out. Let's call him John. John continued with a fervent and intelligent evangelical faith well into adulthood but when it began to fall apart for him couldn't see any steps beyond. So he stepped off the Christian journey. Brian McLaren comments on the kind of situation in which John found himself: "To stop where the road of tradition currently ends .." writes McLaren, "would actually end the adventure and bring the tradition to a standstill." Yet there's more to discover beyond the end of the road of tradition. In the Lord of the Rings, Samwise sets off with Frodo, but stops abruptly in the middle of a cornfield. When he takes the

next step, he'll be further away from home than he has ever been before. From that point on he travels into the unknown then on further and further and further.

American academic Leonard Sweet is one who “*sees things the rest of us do not see, and dreams possibilities that are beyond most of our imagining;*”¹ A decade ago he made the point that when we followed paper maps, we could because someone else had been there before us and drawn a diagram of where they had been. We followed the way they had drawn. Now we use google maps but only because the earth has been photographed and laid out before we ever got to its four corners. Still it is someone else's path.

Sweet called that book *Aqua Church: Piloting your church in today's Fluid Culture*. In it he argued the traditional orthodox Christian path crossed dry land with static topography and easily mappable terrain. In contrast, the journey today's church takes is more akin to sailing on an ocean. The ocean is a different every day. It cannot be entirely mapped in the same sense as land can. The way we find our way is by taking readings from the stars – in his northern hemisphere the North Star. In the southern hemisphere our own Southern cross is the known point from which to take one's bearings. Then, whatever happens with winds or tides, currents or swell, relatively speaking you always know where you are. Perhaps there is a human star which might be a guiding light – packing Jesus' words in one corner of the backpack might be a good idea. Maps, whether paper or electronic, may not be as useful on our journey as they have been in the past. No use packing them, though a sextant and star chart might be handy. In the same way, theological systems and moral strictures, creeds and doctrinal precepts may need to be available to us in very different formats for our very different, more fluid times.

It may seem the future is trackless, but McLaren suggests we look to the past with discernment to notice the *general* direction of the collective spiritual path. “*To extend the road of tradition into the future – to fulfil its potential – we must first look back to discern its general direction.*”

One of the pivotal moments in that past journey, in the Jewish part of our Judaeo Christian journey, is the moment of exodus. The packing instructions were partly in the Hebrew Bible reading we heard earlier. We have brought this past event into our present journey. Today we heard read the very first ritual beginnings of the Communion meal we celebrate monthly. This eating of roast lamb and unleavened bread became for the Jewish people a weekly Shabbat observance and a yearly Passover ritual. It was the Passover Jesus was celebrating with his disciples at his last supper with them. It was then he apparently elevated the rough red Israeli wine they were drinking and the unleavened pita bread before them to the two elements we use today as eucharistic food for our spiritual journey now.

If you take a printed copy of the reflection you'll see the part that when you heard it read sounded like a recipe for roasted lamb from Mrs Beeton's *Household Management*. Read carefully, it is obviously a later edited version, setting precise rules for ritualistic commemoration of this legendary pivotal moment. No detail is omitted even “first catch your lamb!” Whether or not this event happened that first exodus exactly as described, there is a principle here. Be ready, get on with journeying, do not delay, be geared up for action; but, in moving speedily do not forget the significance of the moment. Pause at key moments on your way to remember the reason for the journey. Give thanks for the liberation you are experiencing, and, in that moment of reflection, gather spiritual nourishment for the effort ahead.

These are ‘why’ moments which we cannot exactly ‘pack’ in our suitcase but need to allow for on the way. The Hebrew slaves were reaching for freedom, in the very act of seizing liberation. Wherever

¹ <https://leonardsweet.com/about/>

their journey would lead, they needed to remember *why* they were moving out of Egypt. You might remember that they tire of the journey at different stages. Later, hungry and thirsty in the desert, they will berate Moses. Now, in this moment of leaving the hated slavery under Pharaoh they would not be able to imagine one day it would be written of them in chapter 16 of Exodus “*2 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 3 The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”*” New leadership of *this* political party required and required right now!

The exodus meal, transformed into the Shabbat and Passover celebration, served for millennia of Judaism. The Last Supper, transformed into the eucharist/communion, served a couple more millennia for Christians. Take this ‘general direction’ of making sure one has nourishment for a journey – what specifics might that turn into for us as we take that step beyond where the road currently ends? I looked around a restaurant the other Saturday. People everywhere, twos, threes, fours and family groups. The noise was incredible, people enthusiastically catching up, communicating with energy and vitality over food and drink. I thought – “This is communion right here and right now.” It might be nachos and a flat white or pancakes and lemonade or salad and a wine, but it looked and sounded and felt like communion to me. Ever wondered does communion on the first Sunday of the month happen in the church or at the community lunch afterwards - or both? So pack space for communal remembering and nourishment. Then we can be reminded from those ancient pivot moments that the general direction of the spiritual journey is liberation into freedom.

As well as communal sacred observances like communion, *private* moments of reflection have always been part of the spiritual journey. In our present confusion, some of us, about to whom we are praying now or why we might still pray or about what we might pray, we should not give up this solitary aspect of the journey. Prayer has been such a strong thread in the tapestry of faith that we abandon the idea of it at our peril. It might need to change nature or shape or content or even direction. But, ‘prayer’ is a time of ceasing outward activity, becoming centred rather than externally focused and therefore, perhaps, coming to our senses at a deep, deep level.

The lost son from Luke chapter 15, at the nadir of his lostness, has this blinding moment of insight when he is brought so low that all he can do is reflect in his misery. As a Jew he is brought to the lowest position one could imagine – feeding pigs - unclean animals in his religion. He is hungry, wishing he could fill his empty stomach with the corn cobs the pigs were eating. Then, Jesus says, in this story which for me encapsulates the whole of the Gospel: “*When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’*”

Here is one of the reasons why we need to continue walking the spiritual journey and why that journey needs to include alone time. Inevitably, all human beings have moments such as this recur in their lives. We all can fall into an inflated sense of our own importance. In his moment of inflation, the younger son thought he was entitled to half his father’s wealth. Now! He probably thought it was because he was such a swell guy that he had a bunch of friends - until the money ran out. Forced then to watch hungry pigs gobble what he would have liked to have eaten, he has the time and the space to ‘come to himself.’

Our spiritual journey is as much as anything a journey into ourselves, a journey towards understanding and knowing ourselves better. Looking deep inside, when we allow ourselves to do that, we can hear the divine murmur within, telling us the truth about ourselves. We *then* know the direction in which to go. We know we must go beyond the road often travelled. We must make the journey to where we can find sacred re-union.

We don't need a map for this journey, our heart is the lode-star tugging back to the gate to home. Here we find acceptance we had never believed was possible. Acceptance which, paradoxically, only becomes possible when we admit who we really are without pretence, sham or false humility. So we need to pack space and resources for communal celebrations of freedom. We need also to pack space and resources for private spiritual practice and reflection.

And, beside us, we need companions who look forward rather than always back. Brian McLaren is clear that we must look back, not to retrace our steps but to remind ourselves of the general trajectory of this spiritual journey. *Then* we turn and face the unknown future. We don't so much 'pack' companions as ask them to walk alongside us. I'm intrigued when those who have travelled the church route for a long time get together, we often talk about the 'bad old days'; not being able to swim or knit on Sundays; incomprehensible hymns and boring sermons. Ministers who didn't tell you enough and ministers who told you off. Of prohibitions which no longer apply. Why moulder around with that when there's a new generation of writers and artists exploding with creativity and beauty in word and image? We have a new journey to navigate. We need new resources in our backpack. New words. New images. New people. New books and ideas. Different activities. Change of time and space and location. Travelling beyond the end of the tradition is to seek the new. What we take with us needs choosing with fresh thinking. Old heavy boots need to be replaced with stronger, lighter footwear. Heavy cotton and woollen garments may be better replaced with polyprops. Don't take those old climbing ropes past their use by date.

I know who I want to walk with. There are more, but here's a small group: I want Rob Bell to help me work out what I mean when I talk about God.² I want Brian McLaren helping me to 'seek aliveness'.³ Lillian Daniels will remind me it is not enough to be only spiritual, being religious is important too.⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor will be needed to help us set up our altar in the world.⁵ David Tacey will assist me find new metaphors for the path I follow now.⁶ They are just some. I'd like Alice Walker along with her wide, wide view of who God might be⁷ and Sister Act's abundant energy so we can all sing "Joyful, joyful!"⁸ I don't want to be only progressive, I want to be spiritual too, so my luggage will need to carry a lot. I'd like Sarah Jones the trans Anglican priest who came to see us in 2015 to bring her guitar and decorate the journey with music.⁹ Prof David Gushee might need us to walk with as his former evangelical cohort have rejected him since he changed his mind about sexual orientation.¹⁰

Above us all we would have the creation banner we use in Creation month flying above our heads as our pennant. Imagine us all singing and dancing, talking and laughing, taking more and more steps beyond the end of the road of tradition! Let's go!

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² Rob Bell *What we talk about when we talk about God* (2013); robbell.com

³ Brian McLaren, <https://brianmclaren.net/books-by-brian-mclaren/#seeking>. *Seeking Aliveness: Daily Reflections on a New Way to Experience and Practice the Christian Faith* (2017)

⁴ Lillian Daniels, *When being "Spiritual but not Religious" is not enough* (2013)

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor *Altar in the World* (2009)

⁶ David Tacey *Religion As Metaphor: Beyond Literal Belief* (2013)

⁷ Alice Walker *Colour Purple*

⁸ *Sister Act !!*, the movie.

⁹ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/72804951/transgender-priest-sings-praises-of-understanding>

¹⁰ David Gushee, *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism*, (2017)