**St Andrews on The Terrace Easter 7 28 May 2017**

Ever felt embarrassed? There’s a kind of twenty-first century post-Enlightenment embarrassment progressives can often feel - about still being involved with church and anything Christian, let alone Presbyterian! In a sense I am protected from this. People meeting a minister for the first time do not always tackle them directly on why they still choose to align themselves with a cause many think is on its way out. Still, I tend to underplay the importance of what I do. Or, understate the vitality of religion and spirituality for society. Do the sums, however. Add disruption, unrest and aggressiveness around the world to drugs, alcohol and workaholism being turned to as escape mechanisms. Both are connected with decline of religious systems. David Tacey outlines very directly this effect, especially on youth. He sees their despair and hoplessness springing from the absence of trust in the powerful archetypal myth system which underlay Christianity and other religions. A stark example for him, as an Australian jungian thinker is the high rate of suicide among aboriginal young men. This, he argues, is because so many urban aboriginal youths no longer go through the initiation ceremonies which bring them into manhood. In these traditional ceremonies the adolescent symbolically dies to their youth and are born into the adult male world. Thus, they respond unconsciously to this need for the transformation which follows death, but mistakenly cause their own physical death to relieve the spiritual pain.. The large number of adolescent Aboriginal suicides, Tacey argues, are generated by the loss of ritual, myth and spiritual cohesion. His book *Gods and Diseases: Making sense of our physical and mental wellbeing[[1]](#footnote-1)* links illness, including mental illness with the dearth of spiritual meaning in contemporary western society.

It is true the symbol systems underlying the sacred scriptures of mainline religions mean less and less as our post Enlightenment world moves further and further into rational and technological realities. I don’t think it can be said often enough that we do not realise how different our thinking is from that of the authors and tellers of the ancient Christian story. To them truth did not reside in empirical findings alone. Truth was multivalent, encompassing what was found by experiment, but also found in stories of insight and meaning. A story did not have to be factually and historical accurate to be significant for human development. All our lives we have, like a goldfish in a bowl, swum in the Enlightenment waters of rational thinking. We are almost incapable of realising how different that is from what surrounded our spiritual ancestors. I have quoted John Dominic Crossan before: “My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

However, dumb as we were, when everyone agreed more or less in western society on a common set of religious symbols, we all were able to agree that the Christian story was reliable enough upon which to hang our spiritual hats. Imagine a circle of individuals, each flying a kite. Imagine all kites are attracted to the same point in the sky. The lines stretching up from the circle of people below, form a kind of teepee shape. All lines stretched from us on the ground to the same point in the sky – the place where God was believed (symbolically) to reside – up there in heaven. The breakdown of that shared understanding, is a calamity for us kite flyers. No longer does our kite attach magically to a common point. Our kite floats back down towards us. This breakdown is what Phyllis Tickle referred to as Christendom’s current rummage sale. She places these at 500 year intervals. It is timely to consider rummage sales - being 500 years away this year from the last one, the Protestant Reformation.[[3]](#footnote-3) But back to our kites fluttering to the ground, dismaying us and our society. Where then will we fly our spiritual kites? To what can we attach which will be as powerful a spiritual connection as humankind has had over the millennia?

Some search and find another cause, and resume flying kites with a group of others. Only, their kites congregate in a different location. Communism serves as a replacement great cause, so does Capitalism. Millions of people have re-attached to these ideologies and others. They attach for the same reason - spiritual connection. The choice of cause however is made for different, conflicting reasons. So, these groups of kite flyers frequently collide. The point of following communism and capitalism and other ideologies is, in fact, to fill a *spiritual* void. So it is not surprising the conflict sparked between contrasting ideologies is fierce and aggressive. People are protecting their very souls in such stand-offs, espionage and wars.

There are three other more personal options for what to do when the societal belief system breaks down.

One option is that the person becomes their own god. The psychological term for this is inflation. It is seen par excellence in Donald Trump. To be elected the head of the most powerful nation in the free world confirms and realises this divine understanding of the self. Donald Trump might still subscribe to conventional Christian theology and a fundamentalist moral stance but his real religious anchor is himself. This is why any threat to his self understanding is so important to him. He joins other political leaders and celebrities for whom, spiritually speaking, the world revolves around them and their achievements. An almost opposite reaction is flat despair. This can lead to suicide as in the case of aboriginal young men imprisoned in Australia and scores of young people who kill themselves here. Without a reliable religious system at the back or centre of your life, how reliable can the world be? Who could ever be a good enough friend to counteract this deep existential despair? Celebrity idols prove unreliable and are found to be searching just as much as the young person themselves; sports stars are found out as cheats. Finding yourself amidst gender confusion, questions about orientation, the fluidity and scarcity of career options, negotiating the stormy waters of relationships, is all too hard without any spiritual refuge or haven being offered anymore. Though these two options are poles apart in their character, those choosing them have in common, that they only recognise the part of them of which they are conscious. There *are* hidden depths within them which could increase hope for the despairing and increase humility for the narcissist. Neither however, can see those depths within, so cannot give up their respective stances to make the psychological and spiritual journey needed. This isn’t all their fault. Around them are church goers who no longer offer anything capable of healing these deep wounds. Some churches offer simplistic fundamentalism which post Enlightenment people cannot grasp. Others are offer faith communities which are socially active and justice oriented but spiritually barren. These act like those who choose communism or capitalism as their spiritual cause. Social justice can be just as seductive. The connection, slowly ceases to be based on spiritually-satisfying myth and becomes based on results of campaigns or the state of the conflict with those who cause injustice. We will see a lot of this in the months before the election.

Well, I don’t want to be a cause-ridden ideologue for either capitalism or communism or their variants. I don’t want to fall into suicidal despair nor do I want to be my own god. Is there no other option? Indeed there is – here is one I prepared earlier! I am serious about this option being prepared earlier. It is the spiritual lifestyle which matches the contemplative practice I described in the second half of the reflection two weeks ago. It is the approach to life which the desert fathers and mothers practised in the wilderness in the early centuries of Christendom. It is the mainspring of many religious orders. It is the individuation process of which Jung wrote. It involves the diamond bright centre of ourselves of which Thomas Merton wrote in our contemporary reading a fortnight ago. In today’s contemporary reading, Rob Bell talks of us delving into our shadow side. This is the part of ourselves of which we are not conscious. Sometimes we recognise it – like when we suddenly realise we have just echoed what our parents might have said, or, we suddenly feel a sharp grief or rush of tears as we remember an old hurt. Tucked away in the unconscious part of our selves are attitudes, feelings, ideas, concepts, rules, memories, creativity, beauty and dark matter. We are often afraid of confronting this material, so we tuck it away - ‘out of sight out of mind’, we believe. But, this ‘stuff’ directs our conscious actions in ways we do not understand. Those moments when you ‘over react’ is usually unconscious material erupting uncensored from that shadow place. Those moments when you inexplicably procrastinate on a quite simple action? On reflection you realise an old fear is preventing you acting, though consciously you think you want the job done. This does not make rational sense – another reason to ignore this uncomfortably intuitive life within. What was it we heard Bronwyn read from Rob Bell? Prior to this passage he has been talking about how we collude as a society to manage the shadow material so it won’t disturb us. From there he carries on....

People often respond favourably to this shadow management because it’s much, much easier than actually entering into the darkness….

But as we’re more and more open to the ongoing work of God in the world, we become more and more present to our depths.

...We don’t transform our shadow side by denial but by entering into it, embracing it, facing it, and naming it because we believe God is with us and for us.

When we do this – name our fears and sins and failures and own up to them, describing them as clearly as we are able – we pass through them into the new life on the other side. We have faced the worst about ourselves and we have survived, making us strong in the only sense that actually matters. This is why resurrection is so central to the Jesus story: he faces the worst that can happen to a person, and comes out the other side alive in a new way. It is not a false strength we gain, a posing and posturing and pretending, but a quiet, humble, grounded strength that has done the hard work of facing our most troubling inner torments and then watching them be transformed into sources of vitality and life.

To be healthy and whole, then, will always lead us to become more and more fully present to our own depths, which includes our shadow side as well as our deepest desires.

Not all shadow is about sin or failure. Waiting patiently in the shadow can be creativity we have not dared to show, or desire we didn’t think seemly or a passion for adventure we tamp down to fit in. Depth psychology provides us with a language to describe the way we can find, within our psyche, the Source of Life and Creativity, deep down there in the unconscious part of ourselves. [[4]](#footnote-4) There we find Merton’s “... little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty . [where we find] the pure glory of God written in us, ... It is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven.”

Why do I reflect on this deep, dark matter when 22 children and 64 others are missing from their family home and a terrorist network is being rounded up in Britain? Why do I talk of consciousness when ISIS strikes at the Coptic faith community in north Africa for the third time in two months? Well, both we who identify with the dead and injured and grieving families *and* those who seek martyrdom through violence and weaponry need to look deep within. If we did, we could *all* sort out what was dross and what was gold, what is black carbon and what is diamond bright. By allowing a refining within the crucible of all our hearts, we would all be able to live with difference. We could understand and accept the Other in a more thorough going way than only tolerance or politically correct behaviours. For, looking deep, deep within, *we* would all see within ourselves the violence we see in the attackers. If the attackers looked deep within *they* would see within themselves the vulnerability upon which they prey in others.

Shortly we are going to sing a hymn based on a book by Diana Butler Bass entitled *Grounded.* She is attempting something of what I am working towards today – though she has 321 pages to do it in. In her Introduction she writes this:

In 1974 anthropologist David Buchdahl argues that a culture’s understanding of God was central to its larger practices of social and political life. And when a culture’s God is under stress or undergoing revision, the whole system is strained. Buchdahl claimed, “A change in the conception of God is a cultural event of some magnitude, especially because the character of a culture is heavily influenced by the notion of God that predominates within it” If that is true and I believe it to be so, [continues Butler Bass] it is no longer a singular reality – for Buchdahl was speaking of “a culture” – but this is now happening among many cultures, a planet wide transformation of the way human life is shaped and organised. On the face of it, the question “where is God?” might appear to be an arcane theological notion, but it is, in reality, a profound contemporary global inquiry. Depending on how it is answered, “Where is God” could be a social and political question with sweeping consequences for the future. To relocate God is to reground our lives.[[5]](#footnote-5)

If these writers are to be believed, the task of finding new language and new locations for God will affect the health of the whole planet. What we do here is not some embarrassing spiritual aberration. It is vitally important, in this crazy world of ours, that we do not sell the world short with what we reflect upon from our pulpits and in our hearts. It is vitally important what books we read and what conversations we have. Certainly, let us not produce simplistic fundamentalism, but also let us not offer only spiritually undernourished human-sized protest and political argument. Go home today and read the bible readings which are printed with the reflection and you will sense the urgency with which the early Christians realised they needed to act. That urgent need is here and now too.

* Let *us* offer true soul food and go deeper *without* apology.
* Let’s not excuse ourselves for going too Deep, as the cover of the order of service suggests, but ensure we do not need to apologise for not going Deep enough.

Susan Jones [minister@standrews.org.nz](mailto:minister@standrews.org.nz) 027 321 4870 04 909 9612

**Readings for Easter 7 28 May 2017**

**1 Peter 4:12-14 Suffering for Being a Christian**

12Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13But rejoice as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 14If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

**1 Peter 5:6-11**

6Humble yourselves, therefore, that you may be lifted up in due time. 7Cast all your anxiety on God who cares for you.

8Be alert and of sober mind. The enemy prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 9Resist, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

10And the God of all grace, who called you to eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. 11To God be the power for ever and ever. Amen.

**John 17: 6-11 Jesus Prays for His Disciples**

6“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. 7Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. 8For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. 9I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. 10All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. 11I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. I pray, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

***‘What we talk about when we talk about God: Finding a New Faith for the Twenty first Century’***

By Rob Bell, Collins, London, 2013, pp 194-5

People often respond favourably to this shadow management because it’s much, much easier than actually entering into the darkness…. But as we’re more and more open to the ongoing work of God in the world, we become more and more present to our depths. Remember, 96 percent of the universe is dark matter – a vibrant, pulsating source of energy for the universe. We don’t transform our shadow side by denial but by entering into it, embracing it, facing it, and naming it because we believe God is with us and for us. When we do this – name our fears and sins and failures and own up to them, describing them as clearly as we are able – we pass through them into the new life on the other side. We have faced the worst about ourselves and we have survived, making us strong in the only sense that actually matters. This is why resurrection is so central to the Jesus story: he faces the worst that can happen to a person, and comes out the other side alive in a new way. It is not a false strength we gain, a posing and posturing and pretending, but a quiet, humble, grounded strength that has done the hard work of facing our most troubling inner torments and then watching them be transformed into sources of vitality and life. To be healthy and whole, then, will always leads us to become more and more fully present to our own depths, which include our shadow side as well as our deepest desires.

1. David Tacey, *Gods and Diseases* , HarperCollins, Sydney, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [John Dominic Crossan](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/43692.John_Dominic_Crossan), [*Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/597796) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. That’s a little simplistic - no doubt there were many forerunners of ideas and people and events which led to Luther nailing his 95 protests to the church door in Wittenburg on 31 October 1517. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Paul Tillich was a theological professor sacked by the third Reich from his position as a university professor. He emigrated to the US and became a very popular theologian, even making it to the cover of TIME magazine. He used the language of existential philosophy, a new language at the time, to explain the spiritual significance of God. Existential philosophy is all about meaning and being. The anxiety most prominent for contemporary humans is the fear of not being. This explains the contemporary fear of death – a condition when we become ultimately it would seem ‘non-being’. Tillich named God as the Ground of all Being. He also referred to God as ‘Essence’. Our human life he termed ‘Existence’. For Tillich, the significance of Jesus was that he could combine within himself both Essence and Existence. Jesus therefore provided a bridge for human beings to God. Tillich’s work struck a chord with contemporary post-war, post nuclear bomb America. He spoke on the radio. Using the language of existentialism to explain theology to a new generation worked for many. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Diana Butler Bass *Grounded: Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution* HarperOne, New York, 2015, p10-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)