

December 20th Reflection

They say that in moments of extreme danger, your life flashes before your eyes. I experienced something a bit like that a few months ago when I was assaulted by a client at work. Finding myself in a rather sticky situation, my first thought was “This is not looking good Fiona”. And as I caught a glimpse of the beautiful, blue sky and smelt the sea salty air, my life did indeed flash before my eyes. In that brief moment what I saw was not just the thorny problems I’ve struggled with, ‘mistakes’ I’ve made, the conflicts and worries- loves and laughters that are part of every life. What I saw, sprinkled like fairy lights through the very ordinary landscape of my life, were many small moments of offering, I might even say “surrender”.

How amazing is that!

Seeing those lit up moments, I experienced a fierce joy and gratitude that my little world and that greater and indescribable reality some call God, could touch in this way.

Other more mixed feelings came later, but that joy sustained me as I was rescued by my colleagues, visited the Emergency Department and recovered from my injuries.

As I considered today’s reading from Luke’s gospel, in the light of this experience, I recognised a connection of sorts with Mary’s response of self-giving and joy.

I marvel at the Christmas stories, repeated annually but still with so much meaning. Christmas would be an empty festival for me without them. From Hollywood film to Sunday school nativity play, these age old narratives carry truths that cannot be accessed by the analytical mind, discussion of the actual timing of events or arguments over the virgin birth.

Feminist theologian, Sharon Ringe (1995, p25) suggests there is a signal about how to approach the birth of Jesus, in the changes of language in the first few chapters of Luke’s Gospel. After the formal opening words setting out the intention of recording an “orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us” (Luke 1:1), the language changes. It becomes more overtly religious and “biblical”, like the language of the Hebrew Scriptures, as the events around Jesus birth are recounted. Then the style of language changes

again, to more everyday words at chapter 3, where Luke begins the account of Jesus public ministry. Ringe suggests that this means a less literal approach to the Christmas narrative might be appropriate.

When I look at the passage that Lyn read for us today, from the angel's encounter with Mary, through her visit to her older "cousin" Elizabeth, and then to Mary's song of praise, I see three moments, three pictures. It is a triptych. Perhaps we could call it a "Triptych of grace".

An intense emotional journey is conveyed in these three moments. In the first scene, the Annunciation, we see Mary's initial shock, distress and fear. That changes as she moves from questioning, to opening to possibility, then acceptance, risk taking and offering.

In the second picture, we see Mary seeking and finding connection, possibly reassurance, and certainly affirmation and joy in her meeting with Elizabeth.

In the third picture the view expands to include the past, present and future. Emotion is heightened as Mary sings an ecstatic hymn of praise- the Magnificat.

As we focus on these three scenes, we are drawn in to this apparently simple tale of two unexpectedly pregnant women. We identify with their emotions and experiences, and our own consciousness expands along with the story. Is it possible that we too could be part of this beautiful movement of the spirit from troubled fear to self-giving and joy?

Perhaps some of you, like me, may find yourselves a little hesitant about the words used to describe this dynamic of self-giving. There is a cluster of words that could be used, I think, from "offering" which we can and do use in our vocabulary here, to the very uncomfortable "submit".

"Submit" goes along with the negative portrayal of a rather pale and insipid Mary who has no strong sense of self or possibly any right to refuse. Another word we could use might be "surrender". This word also implies a letting go of control, but more voluntarily, and has some overtly religious connotations.

"Consent", as used in the Iona Community hymn we sang earlier is also possibility, though it may have more legalistic overtones these days.

Cooperation sounds a bit stingy... partnership or co-creation are possible but miss out perhaps on some acknowledgement of our limitations as human beings.

Whatever words we find work for us, I think the qualities of freedom, trust and generosity of spirit are the essence of this response. Those are qualities that warm our hearts.

The picture of a pale and insipid Mary who submits to God's will is not faithful to the Biblical portrayal. Mary stands firmly in the tradition of other important women in the Hebrew Scriptures who experienced their own angelic announcements of births to come. Strong women such as the matriarch Sarah in Genesis 18 and Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel, whose song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 is a model for Mary's song of praise. (Newsom et al, 2012 p284). The Mary who sings the Magnificat seems to have a vitality and determination of her own.

If we hold up a mirror to that vitality and determination, we see in it a reflection of Mary's God, the God she describes in her song of praise. This God has not only been mindful of Mary and blessed her personally, but has a bias towards the disadvantaged and oppressed. This God turns the established order upside down and keeps ancient promises, feeding the hungry and bringing justice. It is in the context of her relationship with this God that Mary is able to accept graciously, her role as God-bearer and mother of Jesus.

We already know something of this dynamic of offering or surrender, in our own lives. It is part of the ebb and flow that grows in any mutually loving and respectful personal relationship. Our church and workplaces at their healthiest, can be places where this dynamic flourishes as individual needs find their place within the greater purpose of the organisation. We have seen this happen at a national level too in New Zealand, as people gave up their rights to freedom of movement and association for the greater wellbeing of all, during Lockdown.

It is possible to cultivate this attribute in our spiritual lives, if we choose. Spiritual practices such as some types of prayer and meditation, going on retreat or spiritual direction give us the opportunity to release our own immediate agendas and stories about our lives, (Bachelard 2012) and open to divine possibility. But I think that, while this attitude of self-giving is something we may consciously cultivate, in essence it is more intuitive, a movement of pure grace as we respond to the glimpses of the holy that come in our lives.

In the context of our spirituality, what then could we ultimately be surrendering to? Different traditions express this in different ways. I like how the founder of the Worldwide Community for Christian Meditation puts it.

John Main describes of the purpose of meditation in this way.....

“We are seeking simply to be the person we are called to be. We are seeking simply to accept as fully as possible, and to respond as fully as possible, to the gift of our own creation.....

What that means is discovering our own harmony, our own potential for growth, our own wholeness; discovering what the New Testament called the 'fullness of life'". (WCCM, 2016, pp 8 and 10).

There is risk of course, associated with this response of offering ourselves, as we realise that we, like Mary have very limited control of events around us. Mary is warned by the aged Simeon when she brings the newborn Jesus to the Temple that “a sword will pierce your own soul” (Luke 2:35). And we know there is a dark side to Mary’s choice, as her son Jesus will suffer a violent and painful death.

But there is something greater at stake here.

In our first hymn we sang “You are born in us again”. I believe that this conscious, inner process of offering is a response that can allow that birthing to happen. Each birth may be different, but the good news for us and our world, is that we too can be “God bearers”.

This is not just an individual process.

Let’s look again at the “Triptych of grace” the three moments in Mary’s story we considered earlier.

You will notice, perhaps that the first picture is an individual experience as Mary encounters the angel. The second is an interpersonal, moment as she visits Elizabeth and her household to share the news. The third has wider, societal aspects as Mary sings of the past history of her people, looks forward to the future, and sees a vision of a transformed present.

I’m interested in how these three layers of individual, interpersonal and societal, support each other in our life of faith. What place does personal spiritual experience have in the way we relate to each other here, and how does that affect the way we respond as a group to the issues of a troubled

world? Conversely, how do the urgent needs of the world, and our struggle to join together with some shared principles and meaning, confront us with individual choices around how each one of us chooses to live and be?

It's a continuing question.

But if you were here in church at the start of November you might have seen something of these three layers woven together in our service remembering the events of Parihaka. In that service we heard Fionnaigh McKenzie's deeply felt personal response to the fact that one of her ancestors led the attack on Parihaka. Perhaps you too were moved as she shared with us as a group, her struggle to understand this and her risky commitment to change. Fionnaigh challenged us with concrete suggestions of how we could respond together and as individuals to racism and colonialism and create a more just future for our society.

May moments of joy and peace light up that ongoing process.

There is a prayer used in the Roman Catholic tradition which is based on some words from Luke 1:28. It begins "Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with you".

When we live in this way, offering space for God to become real in us, sharing the life that moves and grows to fruition, and allowing the joy of new birth to transform our world, then we too are full of grace.

So perhaps next time we pass the peace, or greet one another we might want to say...

"Hail Fionnaigh full of grace",

"Hail Dawn, full of grace",

"Hail Mike full of grace"

"Hail Lyn full of grace" 😊

References:

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