**Honouring the Life and Truth of God**

*Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

Greetings from locked-down Melbourne to all our family and friends in Eden! Janice and I are with you in Spirit, even if not physically present, and look forward to being back with you at some point in the future.

Is your mind spinning as a consequence of the magnitude and duration of the events of the last two years, such as bushfires, economic recession, climate emergency Covid, lockdowns and floods? How will your life change? What new ways of living should you embrace? When will it end? How should we as a community respond?

I don’t know about you, but for me there are days when I just feel overwhelmed.

A fundamental question I try to answer is that of how to find hope and allay fears. Is it through human intervention, a cosmic connection, bountiful nature, following the rules, trusting our leaders or spiritual rebirth? And where is God in all this mayhem?

Today’s reading speaks directly into our current situation, for Mark wrote at a time when the Jewish nation was facing enormous political, religious and social upheaval. Rome was brutally suppressing a Jewish rebellion and laying siege to Jerusalem, the followers of Christ were abandoning core traditions of the Jewish faith such as circumcision, and the Jewish people were caught up in a great diaspora or being sold into slavery.

So, for ordinary people, life as they knew it was changing forever. But what hope or Good News might they have found in Mark’s “hot off the press” Gospel? Today’s reading that describes the Pharisees confronting Jesus provides some clues.

It might seem trivial to us, but for people of faith in Jesus’ time, washing before a meal was not just a matter of hygiene, it was central to their religious traditions and interpretation of the Torah. If they stepped outside this practice they would be judged to be religiously incorrect. So, it would have been very hard for ordinary people to choose to behave in a way that challenged the religious establishment.

Yet this is precisely what Jesus taught. Why? And why did Mark include this story in his account of the life of Jesus?

In the midst of all the uncertainty, fear and despair that would have overwhelmed people at the time, Jesus’ message to the Pharisees was very clear: *You have abandoned the commandments of God and held on to human traditions* (Mark 7:8). In other words, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself*” (Mark 12:29-31), rather than follow human rules and traditions.

It was a simple message that top priority should be given to letting love motivate and shape behaviour. But also it was an implicit message of hope: that love, rather than obeying the rules, is the game changer; that those hearing the message could be confident in a time of bewildering uncertainty and bad news that love, not obedience, would bring about God’s Kingdom on Earth.

At a time, then, when people were faced with hard choices between supporting a revolution against Rome or supporting the religious establishment, of holding on to religious tradition or embracing a theologically challenging new sect, and of staying in the homeland where they were oppressed or facing a new life overseas, their hearts and minds could have been overwhelmed, their brains in a fog.

Against this perspective, Jesus’ words would have provided a simple circuit breaker: let love be your primary guide in life, not religious traditions. But it would not have been easy for the early church to live out this principle, as we know from its history.

So how does this translate to today when we are in the midst of the Covid crisis and, like people in Jesus’s time, are seeing the world as we know it change forever?

It seems that we, too, have rules coming out of our ears! I think the Pharisees would have loved the challenges of interpreting the rules about curfews, home schooling, social distancing, staying within a 5 km radius, no home visitors, no crossing state borders, only essential shopping, permit systems, work from home, and so on. They would have had a field day and been very moralistic about it … as are we when we endlessly debate shortcomings in the rules, criticise the limits being imposed on our freedom, criticise political leaders for a heavy handed (or laissez-faire!) approach to controlling the spread of Covid, and rely on self-centred interpretations of the rules to legitimise our own behaviour.

Such responses, I suggest, are not the way of faith. Just as Jesus’ teachings were hard for the early church, so too is the challenge of being evangelists of the Gospel in response to Covid. To put it another way, how do we honour the Life and Truth of God in the midst of the Covid crisis? Mark 8:34 suggests that the ultimate freedom we each have as a disciple of Jesus is to deny oneself and take up one’s cross. Relevant to this, the Rev. Ben Cremer has offered the following insight:

*If we Christians somehow arrive at the conclusion that giving up some personal liberties for the sake of other peoples’ safety somehow makes us less free, then we have deeply misunderstood the cross.*

Giving priority to Love, rather than obedience to rules, is not a ‘cop-out’. It does not let us off the hook. It does not give us an excuse to ignore all the new Covid-related regulations, or to opt out of getting vaccinated. Love actually raises the bar as it shifts the emphasis from protecting ourselves to protecting others. And this may introduce some risks or inconveniences for us. But then, to adapt the words of a former politician, “*Being a Christian was not meant to be easy*”.

I’ll finish with a poem I wrote a month ago as I wrestled with being overwhelmed by Covid, dissembling politicians, horrific news from Afghanistan, bush fires, economic recession and climate change. It is, ultimately, a poem of hope, that it is Love that will see us through these crises. I could have called it “The Triumph of Love”. In the midst of all the joy, pain and uncertainties of living, it calls us to engage in acts of love and compassion, to go that extra mile beyond the tedious and bureaucratic regulations, and love out neighbour as ourselves.

**Spinning**

Spinning its cosmic web, the world

is breathtaking midst a myriad stars.

Creation’s Eden, Freedom’s lovechild,

sparkling and vibrant, a pearl of good hope.

Yet leaders spin webs sticky with fear

of climate change, Covid, border control,

seeded with sound bites – rational, crafty

self-serving narratives blurring the truth.

But others spin webs humble in faith,

caring, wellbeing, nurture and peace,

and juggle uncertainty, paradox, mystery:

witnesses all to the grace of Shalom.

Generous Nature spins her treasures,

abounding with life and carefree pizzazz,

offering, despite our selfish consumption,

bounteous gifts for our restless souls.

Agony, ecstasy, joy and heartbreak,

spinning with us on life’s carousel:

threads that defy our understanding,

yet weaving a tapestry filled with Love.

Chris Dalton

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