

LENT STUDY DAY MELBOURNE 2007  
SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

**I. Wrestling with God: the struggles of a community**

Pleased to be here to share this Lent reflection, and to journey a little towards Jerusalem with Jesus. Some things are important: privileged listening, respect, confidentiality, no wrong answers, holy ground.... Learn a **song** for the day: *'We will take what you offer.'*

**Lent** is a time for reflection, and also a time about struggle. Wrestling with God-profound biblical image. Think of Jacob wrestling with the angel at Penniel, and wrestling a blessing, but limping away wounded, of Job wrestling with God. **Where in the Lent/Easter stories do we see people struggling or wrestling or contending?** - disciples, Pilate, Jesus.

'The surrender of the deep will to God.' (*Merton*) Powerful phrase that describes the Lenten journey.

- What are some of the struggles we are engaged in?
- What are some of the wounds we sustain in struggle?
- What is the blessing we seek?

As Christians, we live in the tension of affirming and delighting in the good and beautiful, the glory of creation, the joy of human love, while engaging in the struggle against the ugliness of poverty and greed and oppression. And that tension can only be embraced where we are. It is here and now. It is solidarity, solidly grounded, as well as creativity, freely soaring. It is political and it is personal.

The night before he goes to meet Esau, Jacob, quite alone, and still on his endless, human quest for blessing wrestles till daybreak with one who comes to him. He receives his blessing, but limps away wounded. And in this adversary, perhaps that part of himself we all struggle with in the tension between being free and being committed, Jacob sees the face of God.

Seeing the face of God in our deepest struggles and the face of God in those we have wronged is, I think, one of the gifts of community, for here, where we take the risk of breaking open our isolation and self-justification, take the risk of going forward to meet Esau, we discover not condemnation and rejection, but generosity, acceptance and a new relationship. This is the gospel of Jesus, that when we give our struggles to God, they become creative, they become the struggles of birth, not death, bringing new life.

**Song: Come with me, for the journey is long**

## **Being Human**

### **The Call to Change**

The journey of the disciples with Jesus began with their **calling**. Jesus called the disciples, invited them to join his journeying, gave them a part to play in his ministry, and at the Last Supper, he identified closely with them. From the beginning they were learning. Their journey with Jesus passed through three stages:

- His popular ministry in Galilee, which was primarily personal and marked by personal encounters
- The withdrawal in solitude, away from the crowds, sharing intimacy and eating the Passover together
- The road to Jerusalem, and the national, political, public debate and conflict it led them into

Their calling as disciples had profound **implications**. They found themselves beside him having to:

- take a public stand; expose their faith, their hopes and their failures out in the open
- live a life of corporate activity and obedience
- be active not passive; they could not be withdrawn and ascetic like the followers of John the Baptist, nor could they be scholars and theorists like the Pharisees; they learned as they lived
- mix in strange, sometimes disreputable company

The disciples had many struggles with all of this. Some of them thought he could have had a better programme. Some of them thought he allowed too many interruptions. There was much they didn't understand. But as they came to understand more, to see in Jesus' way, he expected them to share more and more in his ministry. And as their loyalty and commitment as a group became stronger, they were given individual tasks. Their personal commitment was deepened and nurtured by Jesus, and he constantly reminded them that they had been called not because they were more faithful or morally superior but because he had a job for them to do.

This journey with Jesus was not a training in religion but a **training in life**, and not a different life, but the same life lived in a different way - a freer, more fulfilling way, in which he was teaching them the greatness of humility, and of meeting others not as strangers but as friends

Nothing about this process was easy, not for them, nor for their families (remember how Jesus' family thought he was mad) and especially not for the society they lived in, for whom their somewhat anarchic lifestyle and subversive attitudes to such things as authority, wealth, religion and culture were intensely threatening. Many of those who were most threatened did all they could to block change, to resist it, and ultimately were prepared to kill Jesus to prevent the upsetting of a status quo that served them very well.

If we look at the kinds of things that made people so resistant to the kind of change Jesus represented, they have a curiously modern resonance to them.

- There were the people who were like Lot's wife, who couldn't change because they were paralysed by their attachment to the past, who, just when they most needed to keep going forward, would stop and look back, and would, for all the world like a pillar of salt, get stuck, immobilised, whether by grief or shame, by the longing for past achievements and experiences, or simply by the inability to let go and move on.
- There were the people who were like the rich ruler, who couldn't change because they were too weighed down by stuff, who simply were too scared of losing what they had to ditch it and learn to travel light. But as the disciples had learned, you had to be ready to travel light.
- There were the people who didn't want to be healed, who couldn't answer that question that Jesus asked the blind man by the temple gate because actually they saw that being healed- changing- meant taking responsibility for your life, and not being a victim any more, and that it would all involve an awful lot of hard work.
- There were the people who were too attached to their own particular picture of themselves, like Jesus' own townspeople who couldn't change because they didn't like it when the critique was turned on them and who simply closed their minds to the possibility of something different.
- There were the people like the tax collector in the temple, who couldn't change because, actually, they didn't need to change, there was nothing wrong with them, it was everybody else who needed to change.
- And then there were the people whose profit, power and influence would be threatened by change.

We've probably all been all of these at some time in our lives. In all of these people, there was a fear in there somewhere. If anything blocks change, it's fear. It's not wicked or immoral or weak to feel fear. It's just human. The disciples felt fear a lot; Jesus felt fear. But for them, they had something that was even stronger than fear that helped them to take the risks of change, to take the leap into the unknown, the new. They all, including Jesus, who was fabulously open to change, kept their eyes on the prize.

#### **Group Work -**

- The disciples found themselves have to meet and engage with people who were outside the acceptable boundaries of their faith and culture. What can we learn from their experience?
- The disciples found their assumptions about God being challenged by Jesus. Are there ways in which this is happening to us?

## II. The shining wilderness

Traditionally Lent has been observed in Christian churches as the period from Ash Wednesday through to Palm Sunday, in part remembering the forty days Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism by John in the River Jordan. It was a time of solitude, fasting and prayer, in preparation for the beginning of his ministry in Galilee and beyond. It was also a time of temptation, when the allure of worldly power and spiritual glamour assailed a man weakened by hunger, danger and the interior as well as exterior exposure of the desert. So Lent has been considered a time when followers of Jesus also practice a measure of interior withdrawal and reflection, in which to look with some honesty at the wilderness places in our hearts and lives, to remember and name our own temptations and frailties and to hear again the call to conversion, to turning as the prodigal son did and heading for home.

To be in the wilderness, is not an easy experience. For the people of Israel, after their exodus from slavery in Egypt, it was a time of being lost with no signposts or maps, homeless with only a dream to keep them going. It meant vulnerability to all the dangers of the wilderness, exposure to the elements, with nowhere to hide. It meant being alone, with only God to turn to. This desert experience, of course, has not gone from the world. Experience of the millions of displaced peoples, of refugees and asylum seekers, of stateless people. But it is sometimes also our experience when the maps are torn up. Bereavement, redundancy, family breakdown, serious illness...all desert experiences.

### **Time of silent reflection; our own desert experiences, those of others**

Jesus' experience of emptiness, loss and dispossession is not just a feature of being alone in the rootless desert. It is a central fact of his life; that it was given up, poured out, for others. This self-emptying, *kenosis*, is at the heart of the incarnation of Jesus. It offered up the things of the world not because they are wrong or bad in themselves, far from it. But, held too tightly, they divide our loyalties; they crowd our hearts. Jesus called human beings to love our enemies. We need spacious hearts to be able to love our enemies, with all that that implies. Lent is a time of making space in our hearts. In the words of Janet Morley, it is a time to *'unclothe us of our pride, unweave our thoughts, uncomplicate our hearts, and give us surrender.....'* In and through the painful process of surrendering our small loves, God breaks open our hearts and makes room for greater loves. The barren wilderness becomes 'the shining wilderness.'

In Jesus, we are offered an alternative to the way of judgement and death; the way of struggle and birth and transformation. And on the border between the human and the divine, God is no longer far away, distant, out of reach. Jesus comes among us, is one of us, the everlasting glory dipping into time, the power of God among us and within us.

*As far as meaning is from speech; as beauty from a rose  
As far as music is from sound; and poetry from prose  
As far as love from friendship is; as reason is from truth  
As far as laughter is from joy; and early years from youth.  
As far as love from shining eyes; as passion from a kiss.  
So far is God from God's green earth; so far that world from this.*

## Ministering Angels

Angels teach us a great deal about the worldview of the early Hebrews. They had a strong belief that the human personality is open to invasion by the Spirit of God in an extraordinarily powerful way, so much so that the same characters in some of the earliest biblical stories are described both as men and as angels - the descriptions are interchangeable! Our strict division between the natural and supernatural was much less strict, much more blurred for them. They took the softness, the permeability of that boundary entirely for granted. It was only by the time of later old Testament writing that the distance between the human and divine had become great enough to require the presence of intermediaries, of go-betweens, bridging the gap between heaven and earth. The immanent God, the God who moved with power among people and in places, had become the transcendent God, distant, wholly out of reach.

And the early Hebrews were also intensely communitarian in their outlook and way of life - the family and its continuance were everything, the individual insignificant beyond his function in the family. So for them, the notion of a lonely, isolated divine being was inconceivable. Even God needed a community - a house full of servants, companions. God needed angels in order not to be alone.

And a third characteristic of angels for the Hebrews -and this extends into the New Testament also - is that they are a marker of situations of extremity. They always show up at times when people are at the absolute or ultimate limits of their experience. Sometimes these are called liminal, or boundary experiences, because we do not know what is beyond them - indeed, we can barely imagine a 'beyond' at all. These liminal moments share three features in the Bible. First of all, they are moments of **power**. The power may be that of birth, of sexuality, of love, of creativity, of aggression or self-assertion or destruction, in human beings or in nature. There are scriptural examples of all of these. And they come accompanied by angels. These angels are messengers of a power that is outwith our control!

Second, they are moments of **struggle**. Somewhere in them, there is a choice to be made, a struggle to be engaged in-and always, though there may be an external adversary, the real struggle is with oneself and with God, whether it is the struggle of Abraham on the mountain or Mary choosing to say yes, or Jesus wrestling in the wilderness. Sometimes the angel plays the role of adversary, sometimes of messenger, sometimes of guardian and helper. But there's always an angel.

And thirdly, they are moments of **transformation**. To go beyond the known, to step out in faith, is not just to change our situation. It is to change ourselves. When we go across, we will be different. The sacraments of the church recognise this deep truth. They hold up for us the means of transformation. Baptism requires us to go through the waters of repentance, of turning in a new direction. Breaking of bread transforms the brokenness which otherwise leads to death into something life-giving. Transformation comes accompanied by angels.

**Groups: Who have been the angels who ministered to you; in moments of power, in moments of struggle, in moments of transformation?**

## A Touching Place

### SONG: Mun gu Nimwema

Holy Week: the importance of bodies

crowds, healing, anointing, feeding, footwashing, torturing and killing, laying out for burial.

To be witnesses to the gospel is to **be** the reminder of God's love and God's need, not in some abstract, sentimental way but in our concrete personal and political actions and decisions. It is to be the reminder that if we have not love, as Paul says, we are nothing. But love is so often sentimentalised and glamorized. We live in a world which so often seems to value only the attractive, the productive, the exotic, and to reserve love to a Hollywood fantasy. Everything which does not fit the glossy picture is airbrushed out. This is not accidental. The Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, writes:

*"What is love if it remains invisible and intangible? Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. The devastating poverty in which millions of children live is visible. Racism is visible. Machine guns are visible. Starved bodies are visible. The gap between rich and poor is glaringly visible. Our response to these realities must be visible. Grace cannot function in a world of invisibility. Yet in our world, the rulers try to make invisible the alien, the orphan, the hungry and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned. This is violence. Their bodies must remain visible. There is a connection between invisibility and violence. People, because of the image of God they embody, must remain seen. Faith, hope and love are not vital except in what is seen. Religion seems to raise up the invisible and despise what is visible. But it is the 'see, hear, touch' gospel that can nurture the hope which is free from deception."*

### Who do we need to make visible?

But this is a very different notion of love to what we have been socialized to accept. This is love, not as sentiment, but as a deep resistance to all that does violence to, demeans, degrades or puts down other human beings. We live in a culture which has somehow come to accept a false connection between love and violence. I have had a lot to do with women who experience domestic violence, and it's remarkable how often a women who may have been beaten to within an inch of her life, been locked up in cupboards, denied money, kept away from her friends and family and in a hundred ways been humiliated and insulted, can still say, 'but he loves me really.' Rather like the drunk sitting on a bar stool telling you how much he loves his children, who he hasn't been near for years. But what Koyama is saying, and what Paul says, and what Jesus demonstrated in so many ways, but above all on the cross, is that love is not what you feel, love is what you **do**. Or perhaps another way to say that is that one's feelings are only communicated to the other in what one does. To profess love and yet to do violence is to be tragically divided, disintegrated. *It is the see, hear, touch gospel that can nurture the hope which is free from deception.*

These texts are only for the personal use and interest of participants in these events, and should not be reproduced. They are copyright © Kathy Galloway, and are not properly annotated. Permission to reproduce any of them, or any part of any should be sought from me at the Iona Community.