

“The Unwanted Experiences”

(Luke 6.20-23)

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Introduction

Here’s a poem from the great 13th century Persian poet, Rumi... a Sufi mystic of great insight.

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Christ Jesus says, open yourself to the painful unwanted experiences of life... because they too bring gifts from God... indeed they are unexpected and unlooked-for doorways... into the God’s world of life abundant.

*“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh...”*

The First Hearers

The Beatitudes are so well known to us they come comfortably to the ear... but if you really listen to them they are anything *but* comfortable! To be poor, hungry, sad, rejected is a blessing... a reason to be happy???? They're like the Parables – they're designed to shock us into a radically different way of looking at life.

Think of the first hearers, the mainly peasant crowds who flock to Jesus... people whose experience of Roman occupation is one of poverty and violence. Theirs is a life of unrelenting misery. They're anything *but* happy... life feels anything *but* blessed. And yet Jesus names their misery – having nothing, being on the edge of starvation, grief, mourning and sadness, and oppressive violence – and dares to call it *blessing*. Some translations take the risk of making it even more explicit... *'You should be happy when...'*

Remember he's a preacher... an open-air orator... and he intentionally uses *shock* to open up the hearts and minds of the crowd. Feel the shock... *'You should be happy when...'* My guess is that there's also humour... that he hams it up in a *Pythonesque* way... *'Oh, you're so incredibly lucky when the soldiers come and steal your coat... You're so lucky... You should chase after them to thank them, and give them the shirt off your back too!'* Hear the humour... because it helps us realise these words are not to be heard in a narrow way. Shock and humour – they're the preacher's tools to shake us out of our existing assumptions into a totally new way of seeing and approaching life.

So what's he saying to these first hearers? *'Even in your suffering... indeed especially in your suffering, the doorway into God's kingdom is opening... if only you choose to honour and attend to the experience.'*

What's he saying to us? Our circumstances are far easier than theirs, but nonetheless he's saying the same thing. *'Open yourself to the painful unwanted experiences of life... because they too bring gifts from God... indeed they are unexpected and unlooked-for doorways... into God's world of life abundant.'*

The Teaching

We habitually divide life into *good* times and *bad* times... *good* experiences and *bad* experiences.

The bad times come without us wanting them. Today I just want to focus on the ordinary ones that come frequently... rather than the truly horrific ones that mercifully only come spasmodically. So I'm talking about the commonplace experiences of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, loneliness, boredom, worry, sadness... Naturally we try to minimise the bad times... These are unpleasant, uncomfortable experiences... so we might try to resolve them, fix them, if possible. But if that's *not* possible we push them away, try to deny them... indeed even 'suppress' them in our consciousness... '*I won't think about that.*' And when all that proves useless we *endure* them, whether it be with grumbling or with stoicism... waiting/hoping for better times to come.

Whereas Christ Jesus is teaching that *all* experience, bad as well as good, opens us to the spirit of God's blessing. *All* experiences are doors into the Kingdom of abundant life. Indeed these painful, uncomfortable, unsettling experiences can bring unexpected new insights and choices that lead us into *new* life. So if instead of pushing them away, what happens if we *open* ourselves to these experiences? It's not a requirement that we enjoy these experiences... nor do we need to go looking for them... (they will come of their own accord). It's just the question... what happens if we *engage* with these experiences... *stay present* to them? What happens if we *attend* to them?

Christian tradition teaches that these painful experiences open us to awareness we can learn by no other way.

Two Examples

This *is* counter-intuitive teaching and I don't pretend it's easy to understand. Let me try a couple of simple examples that might help you hear what I'm trying to say...

Anxiety has been a real misery in my family of origin... The family strategy is to try to order and control life so comprehensively, that you never put yourself in a place where anxiety can

get to you. We shut it down... we keep well away from it. My daughter however, who received this family inheritance from me, came up with a very different strategy... From mid-teenage years she intentionally put herself *into* publicly scary places – on the stage, in travel and other – because she learned that anxiety lives on the same plane as excitement. She learned that if she stayed with the initial anxiety, rather than pushing it away or running from it, the doorway opened into the experience of excitement, energy and pleasure. Instead of avoiding the ‘edgy places’ of life, she chooses to engage with them. *‘Blessed are you when you’re anxious, for the adventure and excitement of life will be revealed to you.’*

The second example comes from my life... In my first decades as an adult I suffered terribly from *boredom*, with all the lethargy and dissatisfaction that particular affliction brings. I know this will shock you, but being a parish priest is repetitive and unexciting – former priest of St Theodore’s (and later Archbishop of Adelaide), T.T Reed, called parish ministry *‘divine drudgery!’* It is really... well... *boring!* I found this very miserable and I was always trying to escape it... always looking for new stimulation... new challenge... always dreaming that the next project or parish (or the next job) would be wildly exciting. But then one day I came across Christian teaching buried in the monastic tradition¹... that said if you want to ‘grow up’, if you want to be free, you’ve got to stop running from boredom, stop chasing stimulation... and instead willingly accept the repetitive ordinariness of daily work and life. So instead of trying to escape, I turned and embraced the boredom of my daily routine as a parish priest. And to my surprise... before not-too-long, a hidden door opened... and through that door I discovered the wonderful blessing of a stable life. How wonderful it is to wake up each morning and know that most of the day will be much the same as yesterday. How blessed it is to uncover the rhythm and the steady heartbeat of life that sits beneath all the striving. I love it! *‘Blessed are you when you’re bored, for the doorway to stability and contentment is waiting there before you.’*

Conclusion

What is the list of uncomfortable places in your life... places you try to resolve, forget or avoid? Christ Jesus is poking and probing at your discomfort today, saying, *‘But what would happen if you engaged there... paid attention there, instead of trying to push them aside?’*

¹ It was Rowan Williams writing about the Desert Fathers I think...

Faith teaches that *all* experiences, bad as well as good, open us to the spirit of God's blessing. *All* experiences are doors into the Kingdom of abundant life. Indeed the painful, uncomfortable, unsettling experiences can bring unexpected insights and choices that lead us into new life. Painful experiences open us to awareness we can learn by no other way.