

EXILE, FAITH, AND HOPE Pentecost 17 2022 TG dtw

The adventure of faith requires energy and courage. It requires movement and change. If we have all the answers we may as well go to sleep, because our work is done. But if we have questions – then the journey continues. Thomas Merton once observed “Religion answers the questions; Spirituality questions the answers.” We must seek, we must search, we must move, and sometimes we just have to sit with uncertainty; experience the trial, the fear, and the challenge, with a heart open to God’s love and presence with us in the situation, however dark it is and whether we are aware of God’s presence or not. Awareness will dawn.

This is the experience of the writer of Lamentations, which is a series of five lyric poems that lament the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Though mostly lacking traditional statements of hope, the poems do manifest a tenacious hold on life. Psalm 137 is also an exile Psalm. Most of us know disappointment and loss, perhaps even exile, but we also know that grief or separation can give way to joy and reconnection.

In our second reading today, Paul, exiled in prison, recalls the tears of Timothy, hoping that he might see him again and be filled with joy. He is reminded of Timothy’s sincere faith and writes, ‘God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline’ (1Tim 1.7), going on to implore Timothy, ‘join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling.’ (1.8b-9a) We know from much of his writing that Paul certainly was a complex person. But then, aren’t we all? For most of us, the daily round, the common grind, throw up all manner of mental, spiritual, and psychological curve balls which make life more challenging and complex than we might expect. But yet, within this experience, we can often perceive sustenance, growth and a joy that is so much deeper and more satisfying than mere happiness, as we sense the hand of God nurturing us from darkness back to light, from death to life again.

Paul struggles to talk about his experience of God’s presence – *and yet he does just that* – leading to insight and trust in God’s grace and faithfulness in all things – especially in our weakness. This theme runs through each of the readings today. In our Gospel, the disciples say to Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith” (Lk 17.5) Those words immediately follow Jesus reminding them “that occasions of stumbling are bound to come” (17.1) As he set his face to Jerusalem and a cross, Jesus would continue to trust God so absolutely and deeply that he could remain true to his proclamation and carry on speaking the truth in love. And often the truth was uncomfortable. He sent out the disciples to do likewise – encouraging them to be real in the circumstances in which they found themselves, not to shrink back but to call people to Kingdom lives. The simplicity and poverty in which they were to accomplish this is astounding to those of us who enjoy the creature comforts of modern, middle class living. All of us may choose a measure of spiritual poverty, should we, along with the disciples and with Paul, wish to discern and imitate this surrender to grace more fully. For some of us there may be no choice in the matter at all, as unexpected burdens and laments come our way, as they did for Paul.

Perhaps some of you have experienced what I might call a ‘poverty of sickness’ or a ‘cloud of unknowing,’ a dark and uncertain time, a time when, sometimes feeling the absence of God, all you could do was fall back on the grace of God. Was it even possible to summon up faith the size of a of mustard seed? In my own journey, suffering long in 2012-14 from a chronic Golden Staph

infection and numerous surgeries, I was certainly given an insight into those who suffer from long-term, chronic illness, and I have found inspiration from a book called *The Land of Walking Trees* written by a Jesuit with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, It refers to the story of Jesus healing a blind man, during which the man opens his eyes and people look like trees walking – until he is completely healed. There are many people who live in this land of walking trees, between less-than-half-life and whole, vibrant life. You probably know some. Or maybe that's how you feel. Jesus came that we might have 'abundant life.' (John 10.10) Let us pray all the more for those who are chronically ill in mind, body or spirit that, in the midst of their darkness and affliction, they might know abundant life. Asylum seekers are in this category too; what precarious half-lives - many disabled and aged people too; many first nations people and others marginalised and unknown. Yes, many are exiles in a land that should feel more like home. Their lamentations abound.

Jesus found his complete exile on a hill outside Jerusalem. But when we come to our own Calvary moments, paradoxically, like Jesus, we will come also to the shore of resurrection. Our answers often won't be black and white, not clean-cut, but rather, disturbed by the fullness of divine yearning and mysterious grace. How arresting, how sobering is the account right at the end of John's Gospel of the disciples who simply went fishing, business-as-usual, and caught nothing – failed again, so it seemed. And then - Jesus turned up.

I conclude by sharing a reflection based on that story from *The Land of Walking Trees* which I have read here once before in 2017.

Lord, break open the nets of my despair. Draw up from the depths of my being the abundance of life that is within me. Come to me in my bone-tired weariness and despair. Take me back over the deeps where I have found no life and bid me act again. Show me how to hope.

When I find myself despairing, let me know your presence. When I feel that I am at the end of my strength, when there is no point in trying any longer, let me hear your voice. When life seems empty and I begin to doubt myself, give me the gift of hope. Let me act for life and for living in the face of its absence.

Remind me that even one small action for life is an act of hope. Each of these small acts gathers vitality in those places where I have found only emptiness.

When you call me let me answer, sure in the knowledge that you wish to draw a catch in the deeps of my life. You wish to feed the hungry and hope is a catch to be shared. Give me the courage to share my hope with others.

Lord, stand in the empty nets of my life. You are my hope. When we are done, I know you will leave me standing waist-deep in glistening, silver-flashing, teeming life.

(Michael Hansen SJ. *The Land of Walking Trees*. Collins Dove 1993.)