

**16 September 2018**

**Cathedral.**

**THIS IS NOT A DRILL:**

**THIS IS REAL**

Somewhere, somehow we all have our God moment, or some great great insight that persuades us that God might be real. Peter had his:

You are the Messiah.

For my father it was in his room over a story of the feeding of the 5,000 when he was deeply depressed, and Jesus spoke to him and said: don't laugh at that story—yes it really did happen. For Patrick White, our only Nobel prize winner it was in a storm in a moment of anger when he slipped and fell in the mud when he got up and shook his fist at God. For Greta Pienz it was when she thought she'd been tricked as she asked Jesus into her heart and there was an instant confirmation that her prayer was answered.

But then St Peter, God bless him, he's so much like us, had one of those moments we would all rather forget: when he got it completely wrong and Jesus had to rebuke him. So we go from his great insight, to his monumental misunderstanding.

Those sorts of moments never come in isolation. There's always, usually, mostly a long period of gestation: of the evidence for such a reality unfolding itself incrementally over time. For me it was the stories of *The Robe*, *Ben Hur*,

which I read and re-read almost on an annual basis and which profoundly moved me: I wanted so much for it, the reality of Christ to be true. But it took my railing and making fun of that Bible study group at Sydney University to bring me to a halt: 'You haven't seen the Christ, you haven't heard him, you haven't touched to see that he is real?...then why are you wasting your time here...pretending.

**The Proverbs** reading makes that abundantly clear. Allow me if you will, to paraphrase this morning's Proverbs reading. I will read it as a prophetic utterance, which suits the occasion. We imagine God speaking to us...a God moment.

When panic strikes you like a storm, and calamity comes at you like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you [because your] complacency [allowed it to happen],

In that instance you have only yourself to blame.

Because you were warned and you refused to listen. It wasn't just once that you were determined not to listen, and it wasn't just once that you turned away from reality and the truth that stared you in the face, that inconvenient unpalatable truth that challenged the foundation you were standing on.

And that was because you thought what *you* believed was true, even in the face of the hard evidence that it wasn't. You thought that scoffing and laughing it all off, and making fun of what was actually true, would make *your* truth more real.

But that wasn't to be... was it?

Now it's come back to haunt you. Because you can't fight reality: what's really going on in your life and what's going on in the life of the world, won't go away.

Maybe now when you've stopped fighting yourself, you might be able to extricate yourself from denial, find a space and place at last, to hear what I am actually saying.

Because every day and every moment, if you'd only listened, and every day and every moment since... I have been pouring out my thoughts to you. Yes, even in the midst of the busy city, on the cross roads of this town: I was speaking to you, in the ebb and flow of everyday life.

Because this is not a drill. This is the real thing. And I truly cared about you. But you weren't ready to hear.

PAUSE. Here endeth the lesson. SELAH.

I use SELAH deliberately, mostly we come across it in some of the Psalms. And I think it somehow captures something I want us to take away from that prophetic reading (by that I mean a reading that has relevance, importance to the moment, this moment here in this place at this time, for me and you).

**SELAH**, Emil Hirsch notes, is of uncertain origin. In the Septagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it is given the meaning of **'always'** **'forever'**; St Augustin, Hirsch points out, suggests the possibility of **'fiat' = 'let there be made.'**

In other words, the words that have been read and sung in the temple, in our case this morning, spoken in the Cathedral (*ex cathedra* you could say), have a meaning that will stand forever; words that have in them the creative power to change our thinking and our behaving, the power to create something new in us this morning, just as it has done in the long past stretching back to the first and second Temples of our Jewish ancestors .

Whereupon another word from which SELAH might have been derived, is **'sollah' a musical imperative** meaning **'lift up'** the modern equivalent to **"fortissimo"**: perhaps signifying a clash of cymbals and a blare of trumpets; an imperative to **"Lift up [benediction]" lift up our hands in benediction;**

Or a passionate outcry with **the lifting up of hands—an imprecation, a malediction—to make an end of, to erase or delete** the evil that stands in our way.

(Emile Hirsch, *Jewish Encyclopaedia*)

If the proverb had been sung, this morning in some other place and time, the temple priests might have added the term **SELAH** as an incentive to make us take the words seriously.

Ideally those words should fill us with praise, thanksgiving. But equally, if those words find us in a state of mockery, they might then become a stern warning, a pleading to change our thinking.

A warning as stern as that delivered to Peter by Jesus in our Gospel reading, the significance of which I want to reflect upon as our take away message today.

Let's hear the last part of the Gospel reading again in a modern turn of phrase:

<sup>34-37</sup> Calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; *I* am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

<sup>38</sup> "If any of you are embarrassed over me and the way I'm leading you when you get around your fickle and unfocused friends, know that you'll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man when he arrives in all the splendor of God, his Father, with an army of the holy angels."

I like this paraphrase expressed in the modern idiom. Several notable observations emerge which I'm going to turn into questions, accompanied by corresponding reassurances:

- (1) Who's in the driver seat? Trust Jesus.
- (2) Are you running away from something? You don't have to.
- (3) Are you afraid of suffering? Don't be: embrace it.
- (4) Are you scared stiff you're going to lose your sense of who you are if you follow Jesus in this radical way? Think again: which is better to find the real you, your true self, or live with the fake one for the rest of your life?
- (5) Are you embarrassed to say you're a Christian? Then just maybe those so-called friends who make you feel that way aren't true friends after all.

I mean come on look at the comparison:

What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?

(6) So our last question. Do you worry about losing everything? You needn't. The essential you, is the indestructible you.

But it doesn't end there. They're the simple things. *This* is the hard bit. We need to listen carefully to what Jesus is saying here and what he means by what he says.

The difference between Peter and Jesus in this crucial moment in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is this. While Jesus is the 'Yes-sayer', Peter is the 'No-sayer'. But 'Yes' and 'No' to what?

The simple answer is this: it's the suffering. Jesus wants to embrace it. Peter doesn't. Why? Because it overthrows Peter's assumptions about how and why Jesus is here, doing all this. Peter's assuming an act of power: overcoming Rome, restoring Israel's independence as a nation, bringing in the kingdom of God. But Peter only hears what he doesn't want to hear and what he thinks is everything that Jesus is saying, but it's only the first part:

the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...

Peter doesn't hear the end bit:

and after three days rise again.

Jesus knows why he is here: as that same Son of Man to undergo the suffering, to overcome the suffering... and in the end—to become for us the first fruits of the new creation, as the cosmic Christ, the Son of the living God, into which active and dynamic slipstream all of us here today, all of us in Sale, all of us in Australia, all of the world, all of the cosmos, material and immaterial

is being drawn as part of the new creation by which all things are being transformed.

The old is passing away, and the new is coming and is already here, unseen but active among us. In the Weekend Australian Magazine in a special anniversary issue of the thirty notable Australian artists, thinkers, scientists, movers and shakers came this answer from Jimmy Barnes to the question, 'what was the most important development in your life...would you change anything? I think it captures the spirit of our reflection this morning...life is not just a rehearsal, not a drill...it's the real thing and the wisdom of life, which is the wisdom and the love of God in Jesus Christ is reaching out to us through the love of others (where there is love there is God) if we would but reach out to it and hold it close. Jimmy Barnes writes:

I tried to leave behind a childhood that was defined by poverty, abuse, fear and shame...I stumbled blindly on, creating more pain and shame for myself. I knew there were people who loved and cared for me [but] I was trapped in the same cycle of self-destruction that my father and his father were caught in. And eventually, it nearly killed me. But I didn't die. I knew I had a lot to live for...So I reached out and started asking for help. I had a wife who loved me and a family who needed me. I thought that asking for help was a sign of weakness but I know now that that was the first time I showed real courage [...] Personally, I wouldn't change anything. Everything that has happened to me, and everything I have done has brought me to the right place. We make mistakes and that how we grow.

I hope that as a country we can do the same thing. We all know that as a nation we've made mistakes in the past and we'll make more in the future but things usually happen for a reason. As long as we can learn and grow from those mistakes it will all work out. I know that sounds simple but it's the way I feel.

[Weekend Australian Magazine, September 15-16, 2018, pages 44-45]

How about you? And me? What will we decide that will become for us a life changing moment?

