

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Vulnerability as Openness: The Dark Night of the Soul:

*deprived of our senses
we learn to navigate the darkness
we learn to see things as they are not
we learn to hear things unsaid*

I think the following invitation to see the whole of life as *for us* rather than *against us* is a wonderful way to begin **the discipline of learning to see things as they are not, and learning to hear things unsaid.**

Be open to the night...

Pray with open hand, not with clenched fist...

Shapes loom out of the darkness, uncertain and unclear: but the hooded stranger on horseback emerging from the mist need not be assumed to be the bearer of ill...

The night is large and full of wonders...

Why is the invitation to ‘be open’, to ‘pray with open hand’ so important?

Because by doing so, ‘being open’ and ‘praying with open hand’, we discover a wonderful way to begin the discipline of learning to see things as they are not, and learning to hear things unsaid.

But what does that mean exactly?

It means not to judge by appearances, to learn not to give way to fear. Because the greatest antagonist that stands against us *is* our FEAR: the kind of fear that causes us to lose confidence in ourselves and others, in life itself, and to read into everything that happens to us... some great calamity.

For fear is the great conjurer that materialises in the darkness of our nightmares. Like a hooded stranger, without warning it emerges from the mist on horseback confirming our worst fears, reinforcing our false assumption that there's always an ill wind a' blow'n our way.

It will take a complete overhaul of our mind, how we think and see and hear the world to come to see the night and the hooded stranger as a friend, to welcome the vast expanse that stretches our small ambitions, our tight boundaries to their capacity to breaking point—as an ally rather than a threat.

It will take knowledge and wisdom—a certain specialised wisdom—and discipline of mind to discover the kind of wonders, marvels, that lurk in that darkness: an intelligence that comes to us when we are willing to name and embrace God's largesse and generosity as it falls, like manna from the sky.

It is then, in its own special frequency, we are empowered to hear the sweet music that curls around the moment of that great darkness with such charm and joy as captured so beautifully in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as Ariel, the Spirit of the air comforts those who mourn as they come to terms with the wreck of many lives and the seeming finality of death:

Full fathom five thy father lies
 Of his bones are coral made;
 Those are pearls that were his eyes;
 Nothing of him that doth fade
 But doth suffer a sea change
 Into something rich and strange.
 Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell
 'no mortal business, nor no sound
 That the earth owes...'

The first step in the getting of such wisdom and discernment is to unmask the false image of the hooded rider that comes to announce our doom; to expose it as the figment of a mind crazed with fear.

And then, when we unmask him, strip him of his illusion, and as we persevere, our eyes scanning that darkness for the true rider who comes bearing messages of peace and love and goodness, we discover the mercies of God, and the truth that God's plans for us were for the best.

The story of Esther helps us to understand what this transformative process might look like.

For, in that story, she too has to remove the hood of her greatest, and in her case, *not* unfounded fears. It is only then as she goes out on a limb, risks everything, shatters the dark glass through which she gazes darkly, that there is revealed to her a great truth and reality: that her whole life has been preparing her for this moment, for such a time as this, and despite every indication to the contrary, there is a goodness constantly at work for us.

On the face of it, for her to go into the chamber of this foreign king and demand life for her enslaved people, means certain death. But, against

all the evidence, she follows the inner promptings of her heart, as opposed to the white noise of her surroundings: ‘don’t be afraid, go to this King, put your case to him and trust God. In this is your safety and not destruction’.

So she faces her demons, speaks to the ‘hooded king’ as it were, names her fears,

we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated.

and so unmasks him, as the very means of her emancipation, her freedom, and out of great dread, out of that great darkness, comes a wonderful light, so much so, that now in the Jewish calendar on the 14th day of the month Adar and also on the fifteenth day of that same month, year by year the breakthrough moment is immortalised when their:

sorrow [was turned] into gladness and [their] mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

So, we have unmasked the hooded stranger and to us has been revealed the face of goodness, **what then?** as we are

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what other steps do we take in this discipline of navigating the dark night of the soul? What does it mean to be vulnerable and open? **The mystics can help us here. They are the specialists.**

Simone Weil interprets the dark night of the soul in this way. She interprets this transformative moment, as a void, a sort of vacuum, which prepares for, ‘an actual consciousness of God’; as a ‘detachment from the idols’ of our false consciousness; as ‘a period when the soul is already detached from the world without yet being able to attach itself to God: [a] void, a terrible anguish [anxiety]; a stage of nonbelief in which the soul [the person] still awaits God’s self-disclosure’.

She argues that, ‘It does not rest with [depend on] the soul to believe in the reality of God if God does not reveal this reality.’ And the Psalmist agrees with her:

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler:
the snare is broken, and we have gone free.
6 Our help is in the name of the Lord:
who has made heaven and earth.

Which brings us to our next, and second step in seeing and hearing our way through the dark moments. **And that is the discipline of prayer.**

James the Lord’s brother, who no doubt observed that discipline of prayer in his brother Jesus, identifies these important characteristics of a prayerful mind:

- (1) **it is razor sharp clear** about is real and what isn't real, knows how to discern the difference between a 'yes' and a 'no'
- (2) **it doesn't panic** when it suffers, or endures sickness, or misfortune
- (3) **it doesn't despair** in the face of failure
- (4) **is open and accepting** of its own and others' weaknesses and failings
- (5) **is confident a reversal is not the last word**
- (6) **is confident of its power for good**: that the fervour of its prayers will neither go unnoticed nor unanswered
- (7) **knows the difference** between fake and true
- (8) **knows how to help others** to see their way through the 'valley of the shadow'

And then the final, **the third and most important of all means to navigate through the darkness**. King David learned it as a shepherd boy. It is the art of discernment: when we are deprived of sight, we listen for, discern the footfall of God: 'your rod and your staff comfort me'.

It's called **discernment**—an art that must be learned. Without it we can make terrible errors of judgment, mistake friend for enemy, and enemy for friend, fellow labourer in the harvest as rival.

Jesus has to remonstrate with the disciples, the ones who are supposed to be disciplined, the ones who are supposed to be intelligent,

‘Do not stop him...[the one who] does a deed of power in my name...For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Laurence Freeman rightly discerns that:

Merely asserting and defending our beliefs cannot lead to a true community of faith. They make us become sect-members, a fundamentalist cabal. They shut down the mind as an organ of perception and truth. If, by confusing faith and belief in this way, we think of faith as bestowing a sense of being different or superior to others we end up like the Pharisee who thanked God for making him different from others and found satisfaction in being superiorly different. The religious mind in this state can even persuade itself that this is humility. Identifying entirely with belief . . . we occupy a private world of our own rather than the kingdom of God or the Christ-realm in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave or free.” Religious people often feat the power of faith precisely because it tends toward this undifferentiated realm of the Spirit where religious, social and even gender differences that our enshrined beliefs can control minutely, are all dismantled. Faith is the highway to the spirit. Every act of faith we make is an uncovering of the labyrinth of spirit. Belief, sundered from faith, leads to a maze of mirrors, a series of infinite regressions, the egotistical maze. Mazes lead to dead-ends and the more we get lost the more we panic. Labyrinths only ask us to follow faithfully their strange loops and bends in order to lead us home.

True discernment sees to the core of who the other is: not a stranger, not an enemy but the Christ figure who asks for our help: asks to be heard to be seen to be accepted. Sometimes we can only see that clearly if get rid of our excess baggage, our damaged ways of looking at things, be it our ego-centricity, our petty jealousies, our fears, so powerfully captured in Jesus’ extended metaphor.

Your actions which you now know were damaging to yourself and others? Cut them off. The direction you were going in, wrong and destructive to others, to you? Cut it off. The jaundiced cynical way you see others, yourself? Cut it out. Life is too short to waste it. Offended someone? Make amends: now, or it will fester in you and destroy you. Rather be at peace. Exorcise all that offends in you. Otherwise the salt that is you will be rendered useless, not so much because it lost its saltiness, but because over time it will become contaminated. If you want peace and wholeness, that paradoxically, is what you have to do.

Who are you really? What is this life? Who and what do you allow to define who you are? Are you discerning enough to know it for yourself, to make changes for yourself, or do you leave it for others to do that for you without *your* best interests in mind? Much better to go to God and let God define who you are and lead you through the valley of the shadow.

John Philip Newell writes:

*Whichever way we turn, O God, there is Your face
in the light of the moon and patterns of stars,
in sacred mountain rifts and ancient groves,
in mighty seas and creatures of the deep.*

*Whichever way we turn, O God, there is Your face
in the light of eyes we love,
in the salt of tears we have tasted,
in weathered countenances east and west,
in the soft skin glow of the child everywhere.*

*Whichever way we turn, O God, there is Your face,
there is Your face
among us.*

Angelus Silesius notes, rather humorously that

God, whose love and joy
are present everywhere,

can't come to visit you
unless you aren't there.