

Journeying

When I was trying to figure out what to share with you I had been looking for a suitable biblical theme – trees, rivers and Journeying were possibilities. I think the choice I made was connected to, or inspired by, some of the things I have been interested in over the past few years. It includes a bit of reading about Celtic Christianity, contemplative writers such as Henri Nouen, the idea of pilgrimage and a book someone recently loaned me. In many ways Journeying is a huge topic so I guess what I am offering you today are a few snippets; a few thoughts perhaps.

I wonder, if like me, you love a good road trip. I've have done quite a few with my family. Gibb River Rd in the Kimberlies. Another was a trip from Adelaide up to Coober Peddy via the Oonadata Track and then back to Adelaide over the main highway.

The Bible, of course, contains stories of many journeys. I think of Abraham setting off to find the land God had promised; the Israelites fleeing Egypt to return to the promised land – that was a long journey took 40 years but lots to learn on the way; the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon; Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus fleeing to Egypt and then returning to Nazareth; the missionary journeys' of Paul.

The journey I am interested in today is of course the journey of life.

Of course on a journey we need to start.

In a way we have had two starts in our journey. One when we were born but in a way another when “we were born again” and began our Christian journey. Being “born again” is of course the expression used in our New Testament reading. For some of us that journey had an abrupt start a bit like Moses who encountered God at the burning bush or Paul on the road to Damascus. For many of us the reality of God in our lives is a more gradual process, perhaps more like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus where the light slowly dawned on them rather than a sudden decisive experience.

On a journey sometimes it is more about the destination, sometimes the journey itself, sometimes both. A pilgrimage is a special kind of journey. I really like the idea that we are pilgrims. We don't know all the answers but we are going on a journey of exploration. I came across a quote recently (the source of which I've lost): “Tourists pass through a place, for pilgrims that place passes through them”.

Picking up my earlier conversation with the children: on a journey we need a goal, we need motivation, we need direction and we need resources to help us get there.

So that was the intro. Now we come to Part 1.

Part 1: Empowered by the end (motivation and focus)

I want to begin with the OT reading. Ecclesiastes is an interesting book – quite poetic and full of seeming contradictions. I'm not sure how familiar you are with it. I must admit it has been a long time since I've read all 12 chapters. Ecclesiastes is part of what is known as the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament – Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes.

Scholars disagree about the themes of Ecclesiastes: whether it is positive and life-affirming, or deeply pessimistic; whether it is coherent or incoherent, insightful or confused. To me there seems to be at least 5 main themes.

The first: Life is repetitive and, left to our own devices, everything that humans strive for is ultimately meaningless as we all end up as dust. This theme is expanded on again and again throughout Ecclesiastes.

We see this captured in the first part of the reading from chapter 1: *“Meaningless! Meaningless! Says the teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”* (New International version) Other translations use *“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”*

I am told that Hebrew word *hebel* which is usually translated as vanity or meaningless is also accurately translated as “breath” or “breeze” the teacher is saying everything is a mist, a vapour, a puff of wind, a bit of smoke. We are here one moment and then gone like a puff of smoke. A bit depressing perhaps – to say the least.

But in the second part of the reading there are a couple of themes that contrast with this very negative one:

“What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil - this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will revere him.”

So the themes here are, that the gifts of God are meant to be enjoyed, even the time we have is a God given gift, and that the things that God builds, last forever.

The final theme is really summed up in the last 2 verses of Ecclesiastes. After all that has come before - the Preacher concludes:

*“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.*

For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

It may not be clear yet what on earth has all this got to do with journeying but bear with me.

I recently read a book – “Living Life Backwards” by David Gibson – a Presbyterian minister in Scotland. Its quite an interesting and thought provoking analysis of the book of Ecclesiastes. I would recommend it as worth reading. Gibson picks up some of the themes I have just touched on.

Gibson is convinced that only a proper perspective of death provides a true perspective on life. That might sound a little morbid or depressing but stay with me. Gibson believes that living in the light of the end of our earthly life helps us to live wisely and freely and generously. It gives us a big heart and open hands, and enables us to relish all the small things of life in deeply profound ways.

He suggests we tend to live life forwards. We don't know the future, but we plan and hope and dream of where we will be, and what we would like to be doing. In contrast, he believes that Ecclesiastes teaches us to live life backwards. “Live the life you have now instead of longing for the life you think you will have (or would like to have) but which you cannot control at all.” It is the destination that makes sense of the journey. If we know where we are heading, then we can know for sure what we need to do before we get there. In short, we are motivated to live well now, because we remember that it will end – at least our earthly existence will.

I suspect that when we are young the existential issue of our mortality is pretty much ignored but this changes as we age. Even I have accepted that I am almost middle aged!!

Satisfaction and joy comes when we know we are time bound creatures and God is the eternal Creator. Satisfaction lodges in our hearts when we accept the boundaries of our creaturely existence and accept the seasons of our lives as coming from His good and wise hands. Accepting these things is the gift of God.

This idea of using the end as a means of focussing our living is of course not unique to Gordon's book. Most of you will have figured your own version of the same idea.

You will have heard the commonly quoted Latin proverb that catches part of the same idea “Carpe Deim – seize the day”.

Next paragraph not actually shared in the service.

A well-known psychotherapist, Irvin Yalom, writing in one of his books called “Staring at the Sun” says “The physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us.”

He goes on to say “The way to value life, the way to feel compassion for others, the way to love anything with greatest depth is to be aware that these experiences are destined to be lost.” I’m not sure I entirely agree with the last bit – that everything is destined to be lost.

In my own work as a counsellor, I sometimes use, with care, the following question. I tend to only use it with teenagers or younger adults – usually when I am helping them to clarify their values or find meaning or direction in their lives. “Imagine you are very, very old and you are sitting in your rocking chair in the sun drinking your gin and tonic and reflecting on your life. What would you need to have been true to be able to say that your life had been meaningful? Interestingly I rarely a materialistic response – usually something to do with families, sometimes about adventure, making a difference, living a life of honesty and integrity.

Part 2: How we travel: Blown by the Spirit (Direction and resources)

In the New Testament reading Susan read to us, it is the last part I want to look at: *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*

Have you ever seen the wind? We can see the effects of wind as it influences things around us. We can see the fallen tree in our backyard; we can follow a truck over the harbour bridge and see it being blown all over the lane; we can sweep up the autumn leaves yet again. We can feel the wind on our skin but the wind itself is invisible. This is why Jesus used the wind to illustrate the Holy Spirit. Like the wind, we cannot see the Holy Spirit... yet we do feel His Spirit and we see the effects of His Spirit upon people.

If I can take a little historic example – as I mentioned before over the last few years I’ve done a bit of reading about Celtic Christianity – many of the great Celtic saints were great travellers. The well-known saints include Columba, Cuthbert, and Aidan. They and other members of the Celtic monastic movement were characterised by a number of things: caring for the poor, the sick and down-trodden; they celebrated creation; they were often quite creative themselves (Book of Kells); they valued solitude and prayer; but they were also very involved in major missionary type journeys. During the 6th to 9th centuries they crossed the Irish sea, the Bristol Channel, the North sea; penetrated into Wales, Scotland many parts of England and continental Europe and they set up monasteries in Belgium, France, Germany and Italy. Celtic missionaries were truly “blown by the Spirit all over the world”.

On our own journey how are we empowered and guided by the Spirit?

Dipping into one of my other sources for today (that I’ve used in more depth with you once before) Henri Nouwen suggests that God speaks to us in a number of ways:

- **In the Word;** *Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. Psalm 119:105*
- **Through nature;** *Psalm 19: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

Romans 1: For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen.

- **Through people;** God also speaks to us through people who cross our path. People can speak directly to us to give us encouragement, support, guidance or even correction. They can also indirectly speak to us e.g. seeing a person in need might trigger a response from us. And of course reading books, watching videos and listening to podcasts are ways people we will never meet speak to us.
- **Through events;** As well as people, things that happen in our lives or events in the world around us can also speak to us if our eyes and ears are open
- **In community:** “wherever two or three are gathered I am there among you”.
- **In solitude and stillness;** *“Be still and know that I am God”.*

I want to briefly expand on this last point – and I’m nearly finished!

Walking slowly and being present

I sometimes use a daily devotional app on my phone – I realise that’s a bit of a contradiction. Recently the reflections were based on the journeys of one of the regular contributors; a chap called Pete Greig. He was on a kind of pilgrimage starting from the island of Iona walking a number of pilgrim trails around Scotland and northern England back to another island Lindisfarne where he was retracing the footsteps of one of the famous Celtic saints that I mentioned before – St Aidan.

One of Pete’s postings really struck me. He quotes from a book “Three mile an hour God”. written by Kosuke Koyama.

Koyama writes: “Let me make one observation. God walks “slowly” because he is love. If he is not love he would have gone much faster. Love has its speed. It is an inner speed it is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It is the speed we walk and therefore it is the speed the love of God walks.”

Pete comments: "It makes me think that maybe one of the ways I can make my journey through the coming day a mini-pilgrimage, and the places I stand holy ground, is simply to saunter. By slowing down to three miles an hour, I can become more present to the people I meet, and to the presence of God in each passing moment."

The poem that I put on the inside cover captures this idea really well:

Pilgrim's credo by Murray Bodo:

I am not in control
 I am not in a hurry
 I walk in faith and hope
 I greet everyone with peace
 I bring back only what God gives me.

Eckhart Tolle, a Christian philosopher in his well-known book the "Power of Now". In a nutshell the book is about being present or living in the now. In one place he writes about journeying and says:

"When you are on a journey it is certainly helpful to know where you are going or at least the general direction in which you are moving, but don't forget, the only thing that is ultimately real about your journey is the step you are taking at this moment. That's all there ever is."

Staying focussed on the present moment frees us from ruminating about negative stuff from the past or worrying about bad things that might happen in the future. Both of these sap our energy lowers our mood. By staying focussed in the present we also get more out of the journey. I am not suggesting we shouldn't remember the past - reflecting on good memories and positive experiences from the past is entirely healthy and adds meaning to our lives. And of course it is entirely sensible to make careful plans.

The gospels echo the same theme about focussing on the present moment: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these."

So to draw things to a close lets go back to the two readings:

I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better

for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil - this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.

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