

## ***The Shadow We Cast***

There is an account in the Acts of the Apostles, the book in the New Testament that tells of the activities of the apostles and the development and growth of the early Christian communities after the death / resurrection of Jesus, in which sick people are taken out into the street so that the shadow of Peter might be cast on them as he passed by: “Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he came by” (Acts of the Apostles 5:14-15). This passage follows on the earlier section where we are told that Peter and the other apostles were healing many people, the sick, crippled, wounded and those ‘possessed by demons’ and that their words and actions were gaining the attention of many. People even came in from the outskirts and the nearby towns. They were hoping that even if they could not get close enough to be touched by Peter, his shadow falling on them might heal them.

The idea that people would seek healing through the shadow of someone being cast upon them may seem strange to us. In the ancient world there were a number of ways the concept of ‘shadow’ was used and understood. In a hot country like Egypt, then as now, shadows were a blessing and were sought out and people rested in them. Then there were the metaphorical shadows thrown by the gods, and these shadows symbolized their protection. Kings, for example, were seen to be in the shadow of the gods. We find this too in the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures where, for example, the Psalmist speaks of dwelling in the shadow of God (Psalm 91). In Egypt, the holy sites at Armana were called ‘shadow of Re’ (the Egyptian sun god). In the bright sunlight of North Africa the shadow was seen as inseparable from the body. However, in the ancient world there also appears to have been a particular understanding of the human shadow which might explain the practice we see in the account of Peter. In the ancient Egyptian view of the human person, for example, the shadow is one of the constituents of a person along with the body, the name, the heart and the psyche or personality. So the shadow of which they spoke was not an ordinary shadow cast by the sun but correlates more to the idea of ‘soul’. People thought that one’s shadow was attached to oneself but it was able to move independently of the body too. Many of the burial customs testify to the continued existence of the shadow both independent of and still linked to the body. In ancient Judaism we find a particular understanding of shadow too. In Jewish Law if one’s shadow touched a corpse one became as unclean as anyone who physically touched the corpse. The belief was that to be touched by someone’s shadow was to be touched by him or her directly. In our biblical story we see that many people couldn’t get close enough to be touched directly by Peter so they were laid on the side of the road where Peter’s shadow would be cast upon them.

So we see that Peter’s shadow manifested something of Peter himself. And what was that? At this point in the story the apostles, we are told, were acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit. After the crucifixion of Jesus they had all gathered in the so-called upper room and there they had experienced the presence of Jesus with them and had been gifted with the power of God’s Spirit to heal and preach and teach. And it is this healing power of the Spirit that is the shadow Peter cast.

Well, we might not think of our shadow in quite the same way today! However, we do speak of being in the presence of holiness, of goodness, of great virtue or humility. And this is something more than a knowledge of someone's life or actions. It is something which can seem to radiate from a person who is living a good, holy, selfless, prayerful life, and being close to a person of deep prayer or humility for example, has an effect upon us. And it's this image of our shadow - the effect we cast about us - that I want to explore because it says so much about our own spiritual journey and the path to an authentic and mature Christian life.

So let us ask ourselves the question: what is the nature of the shadow we cast upon the world? Individually? Collectively as a community? As a Church? As a nation? And what is the effect of this shadow? Who lives in our shadow?

In the past three years of his pontificate, Pope Francis has been working tirelessly to change one of the shadows cast by the Church. In recent decades, and especially in the face of the abuse scandal, one of the images projected by the Church is that of an insensitive institution, seeking its own preservation and concerned with its own status in the world. It has also cast the shadow of doctrinal purity and unquestioning allegiance to this. We think of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's call for a 'smaller, purer church'. We think of the silencing of theologians and women who question these teachings. What has been the effect of this? Both these shadows have alienated many and caused shame and disgust. The result has been disenchantment and a steady drift away. Pope Francis is doing his utmost to transform this and cast the shadow of welcome, inclusivity of those on the margins, healing, compassion, care for the world and the needs and pain of those whose lives are less than 'perfect'. As he says, he wants a poor church for the poor. He wants those in power in the church to be true servants, pastors, shepherds and, using his own powerful image, to 'smell like the sheep'. Our own country is casting a shadow of cruelty at the moment. Desperate people, refugees, are living in this shadow. And if you saw the Four Corners episode this week about the horrific treatment of youth in detention in the Northern Territory, you would see the effects of such shadows. What happens inside any institution, in its thinking and policies, has a powerful effect on those around it.

But let's turn to ourselves and reflect on our own shadow and what produces it. On one level it is quite simple to distinguish between good and bad. We all see the effects of such things as tyranny, war, corporate greed, crime. But sometimes the good and the bad become rather blurred. We are complex and much of the time our shadow is nuanced. Thomas Aquinas said: "All people choose something that seems good to them". Most of us aren't bad, we're complex. Our shadow is shaped by the issues within our hearts and minds. That nagging jealousy, the unfulfilled desires, the chronic negative outlook, the need for attention, for popularity, control, the compulsion to be right all the time. Much of this stems from our own insecurities and fears and our poor self-image. As a result we can become insincere, fickle, needy, 'difficult'. We cast all this around us. And others live in this shadow. But, we are reminded, our Christian journey is into integrity. And that journey will take us both inward and outward. The goal of our journey is to reach a place where we cast a shadow of consistency and where that shadow is one which manifests the life of God

within us. As St Paul exclaimed, “It is now no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). That’s the shadow we seek!

Richard Rohr, in his book *Simplicity*, writes that “The Christian life must be a constant journey back and forth between the radical way inward and the radical way outward”. As we go inward and face and deal with what is there, so will what we project around us be changed. Our shadow, our effect on the world around us, will be forged by our inner work and growth. Think back for a moment to Peter and the other apostles. What shaped their inner being and therefore their work and impact? There they were after the crucifixion, cowering in the upper room, afraid to venture out, but Jesus went right in and his words and Spirit flowed into their hearts. He got them out of that room and into the world. He transformed them. Their inner conflicts were resolved. He then gave them something to hold on to, the Spirit which was to inspire and strengthen them and in whose power they spoke and healed.

This inward journey is hard work! We need to learn about ourselves. We need to learn when it is our own spirit at work and when it is God’s Spirit.

This Sunday we celebrate the Feast of St Ignatius of Loyola. The Ignatian spiritual path is the one Mary Ward chose when she founded the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary over 400 years ago. Ignatian spirituality is a way of living an authentic Christian life, ensuring we grow into letting God have God’s way with us. And so, leading us along this path, Ignatius speaks of ‘the discernment of spirits’, and he gives us guidance about this way and its potential for our transformation.

It begins with paying attention to what we experience. Nothing too demanding at first, the idea is to become aware of the basic orientation of my life: am I straying from what is a good Christian life or am I sincerely trying to live in that way? And Ignatius gives us a daily practice to facilitate this – the *examen* – playing back our day, simply recalling and noting what we did, what kinds of choices we made and how we felt, where those decisions took us. As we’ve seen, we are all motivated and sometimes driven by many different forces, and they lure us and drive us to make choices and take action. Ignatius called this mix of motives ‘spirits’. He spoke of ‘good spirits’ and ‘bad spirits’. These are the desires, attractions, images, needs we all have. As we look over our life choices and discern these spirits at work in us, we see that there are those things which take us closer to God and thus lead to what Ignatius calls ‘consolation’ and there are those things that draw us away from God, and he calls this ‘desolation’. Of course, the idea is to grow more and more into allowing those things that take us more deeply into an authentic Christian life, and thus closer to God, to become the voices we most listen to.

But it does get a little more complex however! Sometimes we can be lured into thinking we are drawing closer to God and an authentic Christian life because of the self-justification that goes on inside us - the ‘bad spirits’ leading us to think we are making good choices. Sometimes too, those inner voices lead us to doubt our good choices and our worthiness and attempt to pull us off course. But the pangs of conscience, for example, that disturb us and break into our poorer choices are the ‘good spirits’. The ‘bad spirits’ try to douse the

conscience pangs, and so we continue on that merry-go-round of self-justification. So what Ignatius speaks of in terms of this interaction of 'good and bad spirits' we all experience. It is that 'to and fro', the pull this way and that of those desires and needs at work within us. We move towards and away from God. We live our Christian life more and less faithfully. Our shadow is cast and it has its effect.

The Ignatian practice of discernment of spirits does require courage and honesty. We might not like what we find when we sit quietly and look at our lives. We might want to avoid it or deny it. But it's all part of being human. Some theologians say this is exactly what the story of 'The Fall' (the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent and the apple) in chapter three in the Book of Genesis is all about. As some spiritual writers put it, we do not possess our house in peace. But awareness is the first step. We need to be patient with ourselves, avoid harsh self-judgement and unrealistic guilt, the kind of guilt that leads us to abandon the real spiritual journey and paralyzes our growth. What we do need to do is constantly re-dedicate ourselves to what we hold dear and true - and for us that will be the way of Christ.

"The things that bother my conscience", writes Joan Chittister, "are telling me something about the difference between what I am and what I want to be ... Never to feel guilty for anything I've done is to be spiritually immature. Always to feel guilty for things without substance is to be a spiritual invalid. Life is not about its end point. It is about the journey, about the way we're getting where we're going. Those moments of realization, which we call guilt, can change the course of this life for the better" (*God's Tender Mercy: Reflections on Forgiveness*).

The psychologist Carl Jung wrote: "Deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, 'Something is out of tune'". Christianity calls this small, still voice the voice of God. Our journey into integrity asks us to listen to it. Someone once said to me long ago that it's about holding all the unredeemed parts of yourself up to the Light. And while the word redeemed is not one we might use too often today that is exactly what we need to do - allow God to have God's way with all those conflicting inner forces and to become the well-spring of all we are and do.

And so, like Paul, we may become more Christ-like.

And then, like Peter, we may cast a shadow of light upon the world.

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Dean of Mission

