

Who sets your agenda?

A few years ago I read a wonderful book, *Finding Sanctuary*, written by a Benedictine abbot, Christopher Jamison. He was the abbot at Worth Abbey in England where they filmed the BBC series *The Monastery* in 2005. *The Monastery*, like our own ABC series a few years ago, *The Abbey*, is the journey of five men, in this case, who spent forty days at the monastery. Worth Abbey, like our abbey at Jamberoo, has become a popular place of retreat since then. If you have watched either of these series you will know that the abbey and monastery experience took these people on an amazing journey of self-discovery. Things hidden or suppressed in the busyness of day to day life surfaced in this space of silence, reflection and prayer, where there was nowhere to 'hide'.

In his book Jamison addresses the issue of the search for one's real self. He writes:

"In the encounters I have had with visitors to Worth Abbey they speak of looking for new and deeper opportunities to express themselves. 'I want to be true to myself' is a common cry among those who are looking for real personal freedom. The desire to be true to oneself is both an ancient and a modern desire. The modern meaning involves the desire to become the 'real me'. The hidden assumption here is that the visible day-to-day me is something other than the real me. At a deeper level people imply that this something or somebody is running their lives. The modern term is alienation. People feel alienated from themselves, they are living lives that are not the lives they want to live".

He says that a powerful question to ask at this point is: "Who sets your agenda? Who sets your agenda minute by minute, from day to day? Who sets your agenda in the long run?"

There are many answers to this question. Many people would answer that other people set their agenda. Their agenda is set by the demands of the boss at work and of either a partner or family at home. Well, to some extent this is to be expected and is normal. We are all in relationships, at work and at home, and with those relationships come obligations and responsibilities, not to mention commitment, dedication, passion and love. The problem arises when we feel that we are driven by the expectations of others and of life itself, and therefore feel that our sense of self is lost and that we are not in fact acting out of love or passion. When this happens, as Jamison points out, people often react to this sense of being controlled by others and by life itself, by asserting their own desires. As we know, this assertion of self can sometimes happen in an unhelpful way through confrontation, rejection or forms of destructive behavior.

On a less obvious level there may be deeper forces at work setting our agenda. Our agenda may be set by anger, past hurts, sadness that we carry around, guilt, not feeling good enough, inability to forgive ourselves or to accept our weaknesses and limitations, pride, arrogance, inability to say sorry or thank you, fear of rejection, fear of loneliness, envy, ambition, the need to keep up with others - there is so much that can determine how we feel and think and the choices we

make on any given day, not to mention those bigger choices we make, and indeed our whole approach to life.

When we look at the world we live in today we see that there are several big 'isms' which can have a powerful influence in shaping who and how we are. Post-Modernism, Individualism and Relativism are just three of them that can shape our approach to life. They tell us that there is no ultimate, objective truth that we can trust and surrender to, that all truths are valid and that one truth is as good as the other. Very often truth is seen to be whatever makes *you* feel good and whatever seems right to *you*. We're all familiar with the expression, 'speak *your* truth'. This too can set our agenda. The belief that you are free and in control if you follow your feelings is widespread in our culture. Moral choices are often based on nothing other than what feels good for me right now. This is not surprising if we do not attribute any hierarchy of value to truths. And then there is the tendency in some modern psycho-spiritual writing to equate these inner desires, in an uncritical manner, with the voice of God. We all know the extreme danger of falling into this and the sometimes tragic consequences of those who do. We can all too easily allow so many things to set our agenda, day by day, and over the course of our lives.

There is a story in the Gospel of Luke which has something to say to us about this issue of who or what sets the agenda of our lives. This is the story known as The Prodigal Son, or sometimes as The Lost Son, or The Son Who Came Home. I think that last title really says it all. It's the story of the younger son in a family who asked for his inheritance, left home and squandered it in frivolous and reckless living, but discovered something about himself while he was away. The young man left home to be himself. He was driven by what he understood to be freedom, by desire for pleasure and self-gratification, adventure and restlessness, all of which, as he let himself be led by these things, left him feeling empty, diminished and without an anchor. He realised that what his home and his community provided was in fact not restricting and self-denying. The agenda he chose to follow did not deliver what ultimately could fulfill him. And I think that even when he got home he still hadn't fully realized what 'home' provided, for in his remorse and shame he was ready to settle for less, for he said to his father that he would be happy to be one of the servants. It took his father, running out to meet him as he saw him approaching, embracing him, putting the fine robe on him and the ring on his finger and celebrating with a feast, to provide the agenda that would ultimately lead him and satisfy him. His father's love, forgiveness and welcome, all of which he had turned away from, now provided the agenda for his future. He came home.

Just like this son who wandered off and came home, we too may allow any number of less than life-giving forces to direct us, and at various times in our lives, and perhaps even daily, this does indeed happen. This is natural, as we develop and get to know ourselves and the world we live in and find our true place and path in the confusion of options available. But at some point we have to ask ourselves that question: Who or what sets my agenda and am I content with that? We too need to come to the level of self-awareness that he did and realise, if we find that our lives are diminished, that there is something other, more original to us, more life-giving, that is

there for our choosing. We too are invited along this path of self-discovery and like those visitors to the Monastery and to the Abbey we need to create a space to do this. We need to work for and pray for the strength to see ourselves and find another agenda. Jamison calls this 'praying for your own discovery', and he says, "As you work and pray for your own discovery the agenda of your life is set neither by other people nor by yourself: it is set by God". So life becomes the search for God's agenda in our lives. To find the agenda of God in our lives is really the work of a lifetime.

To let God set the agenda in our lives requires obedience. This is a word that may not sit too comfortably in a world which enshrines individualism. It can be seen to suggest a loss of individual identity, a loss of self. The root word of 'obedience' in Latin comes from the root word 'to hear'. To ask someone to obey is to ask them to listen. So being obedient to God is about listening to God, or more properly, listening *for* God in the midst of the many things that make up our days. It is about prayer, for in prayer, as we fall silent, we cannot hide from ourselves or from God. Regular prayer softens us, and allows us to be molded. It makes space to allow God to get through to us and set our agenda. Being obedient to God is about listening to Scripture, meditating on it, praying with it, taking it to heart. Being obedient to God, for Christians, is about becoming a disciple of Jesus and taking his way as the measure of what we ourselves do. German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and executed for his anti-Nazi protests during the Holocaust, wrote this: "My behavior is determined not by the way others treat me but by the treatment I receive from Jesus". It is clear from these words that for Bonhoeffer, God set his agenda. Being obedient to God means having conversations with others who are seeking to let God set their agenda too, walking the path together. It means worshipping together as a community and letting the Eucharist feed us, nourish us, sustain us and lead us on. Being obedient to God means grappling with the moral choices we must make and letting those choices be informed by the principal Christian ethical teachings of love and justice, even when that may go counter to the prevailing trend.

When we let God set our agenda, and in the measure that we do that, our deepest and true self is thereby formed. Pedro Arrupe, who was the Superior General of the Jesuits from 1965 – 1983, said:

"Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything".

Isn't that just so beautifully expressed: Fall in love, stay in love, and *it will decide everything!* An authentic Christian spirituality will see love of God, love of others and love of self, set our agenda. When we have a good sense of and real experience of God's love for us we are able to have self-worth and dignity and we are also enabled to show that love to others. But of these

three great loves it is love of self that needs some consideration. Australian Jesuit spiritual writer, Richard Leonard, in his book, *Why Bother Praying*, has something to say about what self-love is:

“Self-love is often confused with self-adoration. Nothing could be further from what Jesus is saying. If we have no sense of our own self-worth, our own dignity, and the personal love God has for each of us, it is impossible for us to give the same to others and to claim from others the dignity we deserve. If we love ourselves in the right way, we have the self-control to forgo those things that are most destructive in our lives, and we have the generosity to do for others the things that will enrich their lives”.

So this week, let's pause, take a quiet moment for reflection and ask ourselves, “Who sets my agenda”? And as we ponder that question, let's keep before us the need to pray constantly. There is a lovely story about the Oxford academic C S Lewis in the biographical film, *Shadowlands*, which tells the story of the relationship of Lewis and the American poet Joy Davidman whom he married. But when Joy was diagnosed with cancer Lewis' Christian faith was profoundly tested, and as she drew closer to death he found himself praying almost constantly. One of his Oxford colleagues commented on this to him and asked him whether all that prayer changes anything. Does it change God, does it change the outcome? And Lewis replied, “It changes me”.

So may it be with us.

You, O Lord, are in the midst of us and we are called by your name
Jeremiah 14:9



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