



With arms stretched out towards You

Next week is Holy Week. Holy Week begins with Passion Sunday and ends with the Easter Triduum, the great Christian celebrations of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Resurrection. Reflecting on Jesus and the events of the last night and day of his life, his arrest, passion and crucifixion, we of course think of what was done to him. But as we ponder these events we also find a man who made a choice. That choice took him into the heart of life. What was Jesus' choice?

As the meal with his disciples came to an end on that Thursday night and after they had sung the last hymn, Jesus and his disciples went out of Jerusalem, crossed the Kidron Valley and there on the Mount of Olives they went into the Garden of Gethsemane. This was a place that was familiar to Jesus for he had often gone there to pray, and that is what he did that night. His friends fell asleep, probably drowsy from the wine they had enjoyed at dinner, and he was left alone, alone with a sense of the danger he was in and a foreboding of what was to come. He asked God to spare him that suffering and Luke tells us that his anguish and earnest prayer were so intense that he sweated drops of blood. He could have run away. Just beyond the Mount of Olives lay the Judaeen wilderness, darkness and escape. Yet he did not. He chose to remain. He chose to trust in God's care, presence, love - all that he himself had taught and shown others. His surrender to God was freely made and we are told an angel strengthened him. In his surrender he created a space where God's Spirit was free to mould him, to shape him, strengthen and comfort him. This is how he had lived and this is what he chose in his hour of anguish.

This is a profound and beautiful Easter message. We too are called to this surrender.

With arms stretched out towards You.

The spiritual writer and teacher Henri Nouwen writes of the discipline that is needed to create a space in which God can act. This space opens us to the unplanned and the unexpected where the initiative is God's. We are asked to surrender rather than direct. We are invited into transformation of our self under the influence and moulding of the Spirit. It is a gracious space and is one which will have great life-giving power in our lives. As the Psalmist of ancient Israel says: "I (God) will instruct you and teach you the way you should go" (Psalm 32).

There is a story of a young Jewish man Jesus encountered. He was drawn to a life of holiness, a life God invited him into. He told Jesus that he had faithfully kept all the commandments since his youth. He was a good man and he was on the right path and he wanted to know what more he could do. Jesus invited him to sell everything he had, give the money to the poor and follow him. This was the one thing he lacked, Jesus told him. There is a great depth of psychological insight in Jesus' response! He was inviting that



Loreto Normanhurst

young man to surrender his control, to relinquish the familiar and well-trodden path he was on and enter into a place where he would be led. He was inviting him to be free of his possessions. Follow me. Allow *me* to lead you, Jesus is saying. This is the next step, can you do it? Well, he was a rich young man we are told, and at that point, he couldn't do it, and he walked away sad. I wonder if his sadness was because at some level he knew that what Jesus was saying was indeed the way to go but it asked too much of him.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes: "When we despair of gaining inner transformation through human powers of will and determination, we are open to a wonderful new realization: inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received. The needed change with us is God's work, not ours. The demand is for an inside job, and only God can work from the inside". His words capture it beautifully. An authentic spiritual life is not about achieving some standard or pre-set goal we set. It is about transformation. It is about the slow and all-permeating work of grace. It is about softened inner spaces upon which the grace of God can act, into which the grace of God can seep. What is the offer of this moment? Turn to it with willingness. Let spaciousness open up and roominess. Cultivate an emptiness which allows the Divine to enter. This inner transformation is often brought about by surprising invitations: wisdom from an unlikely source, a transforming encounter with someone we had not expected, a word we had not expected to hear, a path to set out on ... We must be careful not to miss them. We are all like that rich young man, being invited to where we had hitherto perhaps not considered going, invited to put aside those iron clad goals we have set for ourselves. It is there that God waits for us.

"To you O Lord I lift up my soul. Make me know your ways, O Lord; Teach me your paths" (Psalm 25). *Make me know your ways, O Lord.* Instead of pushing forward, relentlessly, determinedly, we are invited to the Source. We are invited to let ourselves be drawn there. There is a self-emptying that is needed, and humility and trust. Think of Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the image of God creating the human: the hands outstretched, the fingers almost touching, reaching out - both God to me and me to God. This is an exquisitely poignant image of drawnness. *To you O Lord I lift up my soul.*





Loreto Normanhurst

When we are truly drawn to God, when we deeply long for the Life, Love and Wisdom that is God, we will also *desire* to stop, and fall silent, and listen. The goals we set are no longer what matter. We can relinquish those and not feel diminished or afraid or powerless. What matters is the touch of God, the Divine initiative. And nothing else will do. "In God alone my soul finds rest" (Psalm 62). We will be led into a radical honesty which will not let us rest content with an ego driven spirituality. We will become utterly pliable. Like the clay in the potter's hands, as the prophet Jeremiah says, we will be shaped... and re-shaped... and re-shaped. "I need to be silent for a while", said Meister Eckhart, "worlds are forming in my heart".

This is something Mary Ward knew well. Mary listened and listened as she sought to find her way. Her plans changed several times. She entered and left various religious orders as she discerned how to best live God's deep dream for her. She never wavered in her listening, in her fidelity to that dream. Her commitment was to God. "Go close to Him", she said. And because Mary's fidelity was to God and because she remained at the Source, in prayer, listening, and open to the Spirit wherever it might lead her, she created that space for God to enter. To do this she had to live with uncertainty as the details and the how and the where slowly emerged. She had to embrace the darkness of not being in control as she created that space for God and waited upon the One whose will she sought to obey above all else.

When our spiritual life is characterized by drawnness to God our prayer will be a humble attentiveness. Our choices and actions will be the fruit of that attentiveness. In this space we will pray and worship and respond to God's call. There is no compulsion, no hard-won determination - only delight and joy. This takes a lifetime of trusting, listening, obedience, discipline. But what a journey into peace and fulfillment.

In the week ahead as you journey through Holy Week, the Passion and Resurrection, you may like to ponder Jesus's choice. As you find that silent moment or two, let go, and pray this beautiful prayer of surrender:

To you O Lord I lift up my soul.

Ms Kerry McCullough

Spirituality and Liturgy Coordinator