



15 October 2016

Call and Response (Matthew 19: 16–30)

Introduction

I've been coming to Benedictus for about 15 months or so – just after the radio program, *The Spirit of Things*.

I moved to Canberra from Adelaide with my husband almost 20 years ago. We now have two daughters here.

When Sarah asked me to give a reflection at Benedictus I was pleased but worried I might not be 'religious enough'. In preparing for this reflection I realised I have had plenty of religion and my concern was about whether I felt certain enough in my beliefs and faith.

I've picked three stages or transitions that have led me to be here today, along the theme of Call and Response.

Full immersion religion

For the first almost 20 years of my life I went to a Baptist church. I went to a Lutheran school for 12 years.

I guess my 'call' in this time would have to be being baptised as a 14 year old. For Baptists this is the critical moment to 'opt in' and I went for it.

I guess you could say I was pretty devout for the next four to five years. Church life and youth group were big influences on my life, my identity and way of understanding the world.

I think of this stage as being like the devout man in the reading who asked Jesus, what must I do to enter the kingdom of heaven. I obeyed the commandments fairly well (I thought) but wanted to feel like I had 'done enough' and had a keen sense of my own privilege in the world. While I cared a lot about poverty and foreign aid, like the young man in the parable, I didn't give up all my possessions and choose a life of poverty and charity. This literal reading of the passage was how I looked at this at the time. Like the 'rich young man', a sense of failure about not being prepared to give up all my worldly possessions and give all my money to the poor left me sad and a bit confused.

Alongside this, I began to find it increasingly hard to reconcile the fairly fundamentalist teaching with my values and beliefs about women as equals. I developed more and more questions about the bible as literally read and the things I was being taught about the role of women, homosexuality, creation, heaven and hell as absolute concepts. I found the 'answers' to many of these questions to be overly simplistic compared to real life.

My questioning and rejection of patriarchal and moralistic approaches to these things eventually led to one of my youth leaders suggesting that maybe I should look elsewhere.

For me this felt like a profound rejection – it was not ok to question teaching or express doubts about key areas of biblical teaching. It led to me leaving that church and the second ‘wilderness stage’ stage I’ll call **losing my religion**.

The mechanism for leaving church was when I went overseas for a gap year. For the first time I didn't have any church and tried out not having any real Christian association. I didn't feel free to do this in Australia because I knew it would be a big disappointment to my family so I kind of needed a safe place to try it out. I was also pretty sad about it as it meant leaving behind my community and a lot of my identity.

On my return to Australia, I had a short stint with a progressive Anglican Church in Adelaide (where Suzanna Pain was the priest). I hadn't sorted through what was left of my beliefs but it gave me insight into non-fundamentalist Christianity that featured social justice and acceptance of typically exiled groups (LGBTIQ, women with leadership aspirations).

For most of the next 20 years I didn't go to a church and really wrangled with whether I believed in any religion. I felt like I had taken apart something complex with my questioning but couldn't put it back together.

We don't know what happened to the rich young man in the parable but I wonder if he had a similar experience after this is what happened to the rich young man after he went away sad.

During my wilderness years, I read and listened to Buddhist teachings. I found these insights benefited me greatly in starting me on the path towards accepting uncertainty and myself, warts and all.

I also found it didn't address a yearning underneath for meaning and belonging that I had experienced in my church years. One aspect that really stood out to me was the Dalai Lama's teaching:

“I always tell my western friends that it is best to keep your own tradition. Changing religion is not easy and sometimes causes confusion. You must value your tradition and honor your own religion.”

I guess this planted a seed for re-engaging with Christianity in some form. I knew there were lots of Christians who I did admire and respect but didn't know where to find a place, especially when my Christianity felt so deconstructed that I didn't know I had enough left to be let back into the ‘club’.

The Spirit of Things

Last year I was driving home from work one evening listening to Radio National, as I usually do. I recognised Rachel Kohn's dulcet tones and the discussion about a contemplative church caught my attention. It was half way through so I didn't know where the church was but the description of the approach and inclusion of meditation resonated with me in a way nothing had for a long time. Eventually I heard mention that the church was in Canberra, in Jamison no less and I knew where it was. I had developed something of a sense of failure

about my efforts in developing a meditation practice on my own (an irony that doesn't escape me) so the idea of a regular, facilitated meditation felt like exactly what I was looking for. Also, the community sounded like a warm and safe place for a 'fallen' Christian like me.

I'm quite sceptical about claims about God speaking or getting involved in minor life matters so it was surprising to feel clearly that this was a call to me. The following Saturday I went and immediately had a sense of peace about being there, even without feeling like I had discovered all the answers or even understood what I know believed.

My experience with Benedictus has been greatly enriched by being involved in a L'Chaim group and Sarah and Neil's wonderful ministry in creating space to be and question and explore. I've also been amazed by the amount of theological expertise applied in a real, earthy and affirming way here.

Things I am wondering about

Looking again at the parable of the rich young man I really saw it in a different light to the literal Jesus saying I have to give up all my possessions or I won't make it to heaven. The idea of richness seems to offer insight into the pious and certain approach of religion where you feel like your efforts in doing all the God-business and following all the rules make you deserving of a place in heaven, certainly more so than the poor and people who have failed to live up to these standards". I wonder if surrendering this sense of righteousness and certainty might be the 'richness' that Jesus suggested the man needed to give up.

A favourite author of mine, Brene Brown comments:

"Many forms of fundamentalism and extremism are about choosing certainty over faith."

She goes on to quote Richard Rohr:

"... Many religious folks insist on answers that are always true. We love closure, resolution and clarity, while thinking that we are people of 'faith'! How strange that the very word 'faith' has come to mean it's exact opposite."

Although not having that closure or clarity is often an uncomfortable space to be in, I'm very grateful for finding a place where I can wrangle with uncertainty and find faith.

A Leunig prayer that I love deals with this uncertainty beautifully:

*God give us rain when we expect sun.
Give us music when we expect trouble.
Give us tears when we expect breakfast.
Give us dreams when we expect a storm.
Give us a stray dog when we expect congratulations.
God play with us, turn us sideways and around.
Amen.*