

17 August 2019

**Just This (Mark 13: 32-37)**

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When I've stood up here previously, it's been to present the Benedictus accounts, and it's been my great privilege to serve as our treasurer these past few years. Now I know some of you will hear that as gentle sarcasm, but in fact the task invokes for me a treasured memory I have from childhood, of sitting up at the kitchen table and counting the offertory with my grandfather whilst Nan prepared Sunday lunch. In those days, long before direct-debit, coins needed to be stacked in neat piles and wrapped in brown paper, the coloured markings of which varied with the denomination. I enjoyed the counting, the ordering and the colours, but most of all I adored my grandparents' company. If our encounters with, or callings from, God often come through people, then it's certainly true that my first inklings of the goodness of God were conveyed by grandparents.

I would be staying with them for the weekend, which were the only times I attended church as a child. My parents loved me, I knew – I was their only child and my childhood was very happy, but neither of them were interested in the spiritual life. It was not until I was invited as a teenager to an outreach service by a school friend that I had occasion, in a church setting, to ponder the Christian message. I went forward at the end of the service and 'committed' my life to Christ. I didn't have any clear understanding at the time of what that entailed and my commitment was, in any event, short lived. It was, however, accompanied by a powerful experience of God, the likes of which I have only recently begun to experience again.

School finished; university followed – 6 years which confirmed my love of learning, although they weren't entirely trouble free. My parents having separated in my last year of school, I had to adjust to their re-partnering together with new living arrangements. I also had to navigate a couple of bad bouts of depression which I mention here as a mark of solidarity with others of us, and other of God's

children, who suffer mental ill-health. Whilst they wouldn't be the last, I consider myself blessed that they proved then, and have proven since, to be very treatable. Compared with my peers I had, at university, some catching up to do. Not in terms of drugs or rock n roll, but in terms of sex – though not in the sense which might most immediately come to mind! Having lived the first 21 years of my life blissfully but completely asexually, I awakened to my homosexuality.

I don't want to say too much on this topic here because I'll return to it briefly at the end. That said, you can imagine that I was aware, as an occasional attendee of the Evangelical Union, of an ostensible conflict between Christianity and my new-found sexual identity. The conflict was not a source of anguish for me because I had by then drifted away from faith. I want to mention, though, the way I returned to spiritual matters for a period at the end of uni, because I think it is instructive of how God meets us in our humanity.

In my final year I was blessed to get to know a lecturer who mentored me professionally and who, I knew, worshipped together with her husband across the road from the law school at St James, King St in Sydney. It was experiencing God's love through her that inspired me to attend services at St James. And at St James I encountered God in the beauty of the liturgy and the music, a mysterious and spacious God who loved me just as I was. If I had any doubt about that, in respect of my sexuality for example, I only needed to look around at the congregation! I had probably told my lecturer that I was gay but I didn't know that St James was an inclusive church, or that such churches existed – apart, possibly, from MCC –and the reason I wanted to go to church was not to be affirmed in any attempt at reconciling my sexuality with Christian faith but simply to get to know the God whose love my lecturer was reflecting. My point is that God was calling me to church to respond to Him, and it just so happened that the church He called me to allowed me to be present in all my humanity.

Twenty years ago, at age 27, my life moved to Canberra where I had my first experience of any sort of romance. Soon upon arrival I met a fellow with whom I fell

in love; our relationship lasted about two years and its end affected me deeply. It prompted me to return to church – once again, a high Anglican church. For many years my main place of encounter with God was in the gospel narrative as I heard it ‘professionally’ expounded. The healthy doses of systematic theology I received at church, administered by Doctors MacNeil and Bachelard amongst others, opened me – or open my mind, at least – to the compelling nature of God’s truth. Yet as it happens I’m not as familiar with scripture as my years of hanging in and around the church would suggest, and I can’t identify any one passage that has been seminal in my journey. I came upon the passage I chose for tonight through Richard Rohr’s recent little book, *Just This*.

I’ll present Rohr’s helpful insight into the passage in just a minute, but I want to make a last observation about my early thirties. It took me ages – years – to get over my relationship, and I’ve only had one other since, whilst living overseas. Anyway, I can remember driving to church one morning, which in those days seemed to be when I made most effort – a rather last minute, guilty effort – to attend to God. Driving along I was intensely questioning the *raison d’être* for the relationship when I was overcome with a strong conviction that it was valuable in God’s sight, and that it had served a loving, and therefore godly, purpose. And the point I want to make is that I experienced this lasting conviction as sheer grace. Whilst I was not particularly close, God broke through to me in love, to illuminate my lingering sadness and to suggest to me that the part of my life I had spent in the relationship was closer to my true nature in Him (God) than I was allowing myself to believe.

Well, I’ve mentioned a couple of occasions that I have encountered God, but none of the ways that God has called me. And the truth be told, that is probably because it’s only in recent times that I’ve seriously started to listen to God. Listening to God, or listening out for God, is front and centre of the passage from Mark’s gospel we read tonight: ‘Therefore keep awake, for you do not know when the

master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow.’

Richard Rohr explains this instruction as follows:<sup>1</sup>

Most of us probably hear such a passage as if it were threatening or punitive, as if Jesus is saying, “You’d better do it right, or I am going to get you”. But Jesus is not talking about a judgment. He’s not threatening us or talking about death. He talking about the *forever* coming of Christ, the *eternal* coming of Christ ... *now* ... and *now* ... and *now*. Best of all, God’s judgment is actually redemption, but we must first know that at the soul level. Christ is *always* coming; God is *always* present. *It’s we who aren’t!*

I was struck by Rohr’s interpretation of the passage because I am someone who has always heard the coming of the master of the house as a warning, not as an invitation – something to be feared, rather than naturally welcomed – let alone naturally welcomed on a regular basis.

In the remainder of my reflection I’d like to talk about the ways I think God might be calling me and what I’m beginning to learn at soul level. There are two senses in which we might answer the question, how is God calling us? The first is the sense of, to what vocation(s) or changed behaviour(s) is God calling us, and the second is the sense of, by what spiritual means or practice(s) do we hear God’s call? In my experience the two senses of the question seem to be linked, and I’ll explain how by starting with the second: the means by which God is calling me. Through schooling me in contemplative prayer, quite certainly, which is why I have to thank all of you, for forming part of an authentic community which creates a nurturing environment in which to contemplate. But also through the course in spiritual direction offered by Barnabas Ministries, which I and others of us commenced this year – thank you Sue!

The way that I came to enrol in the course is itself worth discussing briefly because it is, in a way, the unlikely outcome of distinct periods of difficulty and

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Just This: prompts and practices for contemplation*, 2017 SPCK, pp 37-8.

uncertainty in my life beforehand. Difficulty in the form of an experience in the workplace in 2017 which was counter to all expectations, and which left me rather startled and bruised. Uncertainty in the form of my seriously contemplating in 2018 whether I should radically change careers. I'm very grateful to have had the support of particular members of the Benedictus community through each of those periods, and I approached their respective issues as wisely as I knew how to at the time. But in each case, I seemed to run into a dead end: I needed to leave that workplace even though I greatly enjoyed the work; and as much as the career change made perfect sense on one level, on other levels it did not seem a true way forward. Looking back, I wonder whether God was standing behind these closed doors preparing the way for me to be open to something I likely would not have otherwise considered, namely participating in a course in spiritual direction.

I am taking part in the course in part as means to renew my commitment to the spiritual life. It's too soon to know whether I am being called to be a spiritual director, but as I listen to God I do have a sense that He is moving some things within me, at soul level, to make me a more spacious person. Movements that are redemptive in nature, either healing old distortions that have hindered me or equipping me with peace-bringing insights into my present life. In closing I'll illustrate my sense of how my soul may be changing in God's loving presence by returning to the broad subject of love and sexuality. I have come to realise that during my adolescence, for a variety of reasons – none of them particularly sinister – my knowledge of my own physicality suffered. Now I do not want to suggest that I ended up gay as a result – to do so would, I feel, fail to honour God, just as much as it would impute to me a wisdom none of us is ever likely to attain. I want simply to say that the recent heart-felt conviction which God seems to have graciously given me, that I would have been able to be a father, I have experienced as a liberating affirmation of my own masculinity. And just as God appears to be shining light on some past distortions, so too is He illuminating my present circumstances. For instance, He seems to have taken the urgency out of the question I've often asked –

viz. why I am perennially single? – while at the same time He appears to wait patiently when I respond by means of my own devices to feelings of loneliness.

Jesus said to his disciples: '(a)nd what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake'. And following Richard Rohr, I say — let us remember Jesus' instruction as an invitation, not a threat. Amen.