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Showing Jesus to Greeks (John 12. 20-33)

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I've been moved and inspired over these last few weeks by your participation in what Frank, from South Africa, calls 'our Lenten collaboration'. As most of you know, during this season we've been exploring questions to do with the spiritual dimension of our collective recovery from Covid-19. Our point of departure was Neville's observation that the contributors to the book *Upturn: A Better Normal After Covid-19* had made almost no reference to faith-based communities or spiritual practice in relation to the work of recovery and societal renewal. This absence of any overtly religious voice¹ caused Neville, then me, and now others of us, to wonder; what difference do we think our spirituality and belonging actually makes? How does it affect what's possible? How might it matter to be able to express and open access to this dimension of life? In today's gospel reading, some Greeks approach the disciples and ask to see Jesus. There's a sense in which we're exploring what it might mean to show 'Jesus', to make visible the import of spiritual practice, in our 'Greek' speaking, secular culture. So I thought now might be the time to share more of the reflections I've received from you.

Two themes predominate. The first reflects a deepened sense of connection with the whole. Margaret said that key to her sense of the spiritual life in relation to today's challenges is the understanding 'that we are all one and interdependent ... [W]e all are supported by everything in the universe, including a higher form, and we in turn contribute to this. This includes the light and the dark. For me this takes things away from a fragmented singular approach and provides a powerful narrative of profound meaning'. Peter too picked up on themes of 'reconnection' and

¹ I noted in my reflection on June Oscar's chapter, 'Remote Communities and First Nations', the deep spiritual roots of her call for the reconstruction of a nation 'that embraces First Nations societies and culture as foundational to Australian identity'. *Upturn: A Better Normal After Covid-19*, ed. Tanya Plibersek (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2020), p.18.

interdependence. He quoted from June Oscar's chapter, 'Remote Communities and First Nations', where she wrote of 'being on Country', as being 'surrounded by all human and non-human relations' and 'embraced by everything that makes existence possible'. This, Peter noted, 'is the expression of a profoundly "religious" experience ('religio' meaning to bind back, to reconnect) – an experience of 'awareness' or 'coming alive' that he sees as being intrinsically connected to contemplation, deep listening, 'dadirri'. And Vivienne wrote of how 'a denial of our deeply spiritual connection to all that is and to the Creator' is at the root of our environmental and social crisis.

The second theme to come through many of your reflections is related. It concerns the experience of a deepened sense of connection with and compassion for other people. Melissa wrote: 'Something that has certainly changed within me as my spiritual life has deepened has ... to do with a greater awareness of our common humanity. Not simply empathy, but a deep sense that at the end of the day, we are all one and the same in the Divine, no more worthy of anything than anyone else'. And she goes on: 'I remember someone saying once "There is no THEM". And in essence it is Christ in me, Christ in you, Christ in all of us together. When I am really struggling with someone, I often almost envisage us all linked together through divine love, and whilst I may still struggle with this person or group, the edges are softened somehow. They are no more or less than I am, despite us standing on opposite sides'.

Rob shared a very beautiful expression of this awakened sense of common humanity. He wrote: 'there is an old lonely gloomy-looking Chinese man in a nearby shop who has no English at all so I have learnt to say good morning, goodbye, and thank you in Mandarin to him and the joy on his face has been a delight to behold'. And Jill said: 'I have been thinking how the kind of decentering contemplation we practice at Benedictus can lead to more effective action ... If we are supervising others we don't feel we have to control them and micromanage them so they make us look good. We are less likely to put people down to feel better about ourselves

(because we know we are loved already). We are more aware of what's going on for the people around us because we are less self-focussed. We are more likely to see people's strengths (because we are no longer in competition with them)'.

Now, of course, as Melissa, Rob and Jill were all careful to emphasise – it's not only 'religious' people who are capable of such ways of being. Rob said: 'I looked back on my day yesterday to try to find specific actions I took that I could see as being a result of my practice of contemplative prayer. Having said that, I have no idea if I would not have done them anyway and they are more the result of the influence of loving parents in my upbringing'. Melissa wrote: 'It is not that you cannot have this sense of commonality if you are not a person of faith, of course you can'. 'However', she went on, 'there is something different in the way I embody that and hold myself to this, due to my spirituality'.

Early in the pandemic, as we were plunged into our first lockdown, there was much talk of being 'in it together', many stories of increasing neighbourliness and the kindness of strangers. Rebecca Huntley, a social researcher whose contribution to *Upturn* is titled 'Getting to Know My Neighbours' wrote that as she walked around her own neighbourhood early in the crisis, 'I noticed I was more eager to smile and say hello to people I met ... I stopped to talk at length with the few older, single people who live close by, just to see if they were okay, if they needed anything'.²

However, as Huntley herself goes on to note, there's a question about how deeply-rooted such crisis induced neighbourliness is. She writes: 'there was the beguiling theory that the pandemic would make us all appreciate what we already have, reassess our values and lifestyles and become kinder and gentler to each other. But the evidence was mixed. Research ... found that there was no substantial difference before or during the pandemic in terms of people's feelings of being connected to others, their feelings of having close friends or that they have someone who they can rely on in a time of need'. There *was* an increase in the percentage of people who knew their neighbours by name, but not necessarily a stronger sense of

² Huntley, 'Getting to Know My Neighbours', pp.159-160.

connection. Huntley concludes: 'there is a limited capacity for a pandemic to bring us all closer together. Despite the public rhetoric of many of our politicians (stronger together, in this together etc), those of us already struggling with social isolation before a crisis are going to find themselves struggling more during it'.³ And there is little sense that even such positive effects as were seen will 'last' once the pandemic is gone. So what does all this suggest?

It seems to be true that times of crisis, experiences of shared trial or joy, very often do awaken a sense of shared humanity. Such experiences help us glimpse a connectivity in our fragile, mortal lives that's always there, but that often we're too distracted, or self-absorbed, or tired to notice. But it seems to me that if this glimpse of radical connectivity is to expand, if we're to abide in this awareness once the crisis is past, then something like the 'kind of decentring contemplation we practice at Benedictus', as Jill put it, is required. This is what enables us to get past self-preoccupation in a sustained way and so enables a deeper seeing of and love for the other – even when we ourselves are under stress. Rob shared: 'I had to wait an hour and a half at the doctor's yesterday for a two minute check-up and when I finally was seen I found myself instinctively saying "You're having a busy day, I hope you've had time for lunch".' That's grace! It seems to me the key word here is 'instinctively' – 'I found myself instinctively saying ...'. An awareness of and feel for the other has become habitual, deep rooted.

Yet as this kind of example also suggests, the difference made by our practice and personal transformation is often subtle, sometimes almost invisible. Josie spoke of the difference in the 'micro' – it's about how you are in a meeting, the tone of voice you find yourself using, your real presence (or not) to the person in front of you. My question about whether we can articulate the contribution of faith and spiritual practice to the healing of the world can lead us to look for ways in which we obviously 'change the world' or shift government policy or inspire a new future. But a

³ Huntley, 'Getting to Know My Neighbours', p.162.

vast amount of the time, it's more subtle than this – and *in* this, it reflects the way of Jesus. For he too works in the world, essentially hiddenly, from within.

I've long been struck by Jesus' response to the news his fame had spread, such that those beyond the borders of Israel were seeking him out. At last this ministry is having an international impact. Yet what does Jesus do? Immediately he hears about the Greeks who wish to see him, he speaks of the necessity of his disappearance, his death. 'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit'. He's not interested in being admired as some singular phenomenon, some celebrity object of praise. All he wants is to reconnect humanity to the source of our fullest life. His teaching seeks to detach us from what blocks receptivity; his life and self-giving are to enable our access to the transforming love of God. And as he is, so we must be: 'where I am, there will my servant be also'. The point of our faith and prayer is not to develop some virtuous identity that we display or deploy, but to make us channels for the love of God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. This love expands things, completes things, transforms things (as it were) from the inside.

Think of Rob in that doctor's surgery. He wrote: 'The doctor responded so appreciatively that I hoped it might positively affect the way she treated the next patient'. And think of that. The patient who followed Rob being met by a doctor who herself felt suddenly cared for and so more spacious, enabled (perhaps) to be more caring and spacious in her turn ... And the difference that might have made to a family that night, to a child going to school the next day, and on it goes. We are called to be channels for the love of God, but what is enabled through us – we may never know. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth ...

One of the striking things about your responses has been your modesty and humility – your awareness that 'it's a journey'. As Jill put it: 'I am sure I am a long way from achieving these things but it is nice to think they are a possibility'. And Melissa: 'I hope this doesn't come across as me thinking I, we, are "better" or more

humane than others. Not at all. Trust me when I say I have to constantly be reminding myself of ... this way of being when certain politicians speak! The difference God makes, the difference spiritual practice makes, is not some magic fix, but a slow transfiguration of ordinary life. Meryl shared a story of 'Two Family Meals', which reads to me almost like a parable.

'Last week-end we went en famille to a restaurant. By 5.30 we were seated, the first sitting for the evening. Tables peopled quickly. Background music boomed. Babble intensified above the rhythm. Our small fretful grandson, a bossy 2 year old, would not sit down. Brown-eyed 8 year old granddaughter tried to egg him on. Manager and chef, flame-eating performers, downed vodka shots. Staff, acrobats balancing crockery towers, circled the ring of tables. Our glasses emptied too quickly, plates disappeared as if by sleight of hand. This scene didn't sit easily but it was good to be in a family celebration.

'Two weeks ago I went to Benedictus. We were there early. Richard's haunting voice welcomed and drew us in to this still, silent place. People arrive at the last minute. Sarah leads the liturgy and this becomes a sacred space. Sarah's reflections are never easy. She asks unsettling questions. Comfort for me is often more desired than challenge. Communion is shared out and I consume it hungrily, wanting sustenance. Meditation follows and in this I am part of the stream of life. It is good to be there'. And she concluded with a prayer:

God of the journey, provider of manna in the desert
Give me zeal for those I meet, knowing we are all in the crowd.
You who also turned water into wine'

Religio, connection, light and dark, all part of the whole – the ordinary transfigured by awakened love. What difference does spiritual practice make to the renewal of the world? Let the last words be a fragment of verse by Les Murray, shared by Peter:

What we have received
is the ordinary mail of the otherworld, wholly common,
not postmarked divine. (from 'First Essay on Interest')