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### **The Forgetting and Getting of Wisdom (John 3. 1-10)**

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‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’. With these words, Jesus expresses a key paradox of spiritual life. If you want to know God, then (at least at some level) you must already have begun to share in God’s life. If you want to receive the deepest truth, you must already have begun to be changed by it. It’s as if our capacity to recognise God’s presence and action in the world involves a particular perceptual sensitivity – some speak of ‘awakening the eye of the heart’. We must undergo some kind of transformation if we’re to receive transmission.

There are many hints in the New Testament stories of the necessity for such transformation. In the gospels, the disciples are consistently portrayed as not having understood what Jesus was saying. This is not, as theologian James Alison points out, ‘a question of stupidity’.<sup>1</sup> It’s to do with the fact that the very way their intelligence functioned, their background assumptions, the reality they could see and the connections they could make – all this was part of what needed to shift – either to be let go, or expanded, or enabled in new ways. Jesus wasn’t just giving them new information that could be processed by their existing operating system, but seeking to install (as it were) a new system, a new way of seeing and being. And we can see the same pattern in the post-resurrection stories, where those who encounter the risen Jesus are incapable at first of recognising him. Something has to change in them, before he can be seen and known.

This seems to be what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, ‘No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit’; without, that is, by undergoing baptism, a death of the old self and its way of knowing, so as to receive

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<sup>1</sup> James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1994), p.41.

new life from beyond, being 'born from above'. Like the disciples, Nicodemus struggles to grasp what Jesus is getting at. 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' And Jesus is astonished that he, 'a leader of the Jews', is so uncomprehending. 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'

Well, it's a recurring theme of John's gospel that the religious leaders of Jesus' day had ceased truly to know the God of whom they spoke. At times, this judgement expresses a troubling edge of anti-semitism. Yet, I think there's a more general truth being touched on here, which is that it's possible for a culture to forget its own deepest wisdom, such that even its leaders and teachers are incapable of recognising and living from it, let alone of forming others. Wisdom, says Cynthia Bourgeault, is not knowing more things, but knowing with more of yourself, knowing deeper. But what happens if a culture forgets how to go about knowing deeper? What happens if it loses access to vital traditions of human formation and transformation?

During this Lent at Benedictus, we've been exploring the contribution of spiritual communities to the 'better world our hearts know is possible' in the wake of the pandemic. This has been prompted by a sense that the literature of 'recovery', at least as represented by the recent Australian publication *Upturn*, neglects this contribution. Tonight, we come to what is, I suspect, at the heart of the matter – the forgetting of wisdom.

I think we can see something like a 'forgetting of wisdom' in our culture, at two levels. First is the widespread forgetting that there's something beyond materialism, economic progress and 'self-sufficing humanism' to which our lives are properly answerable and in relation to which we truly flourish. Second is a widespread forgetting or weakening of the practices that enable human beings to encounter this 'something' so as to be changed by it, expanded, deepened, matured. The result of this twin forgetfulness is a form of life that's increasingly shallow, dissipated and alienated from real communion – with God, with self, with other people and the natural world. A form of life ultimately destructive of the life of earth.

This is not just a professionally ‘religious’ view. During the week, I received an email from Frank – one of our Benedictus members in South Africa. Frank shared an extract from the Club of Rome’s 2018 book by Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker and Ander Wijkman, *Come On! Capitalism, Short-termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet*. Now the Club of Rome consists of one hundred members selected from current and former heads of state and government, UN administrators, high-level politicians and government officials, diplomats, scientists, economists, and business leaders from around the globe. The Preface to this 2018 book, written by the Club of Rome’s Executive Committee, sets out the issues: ‘The world is again in a critical situation. We see the need for a bold new beginning. This time, however, we believe it is particularly important to look at the philosophical roots of the current state of the world. We must question the legitimacy of the ethos of materialistic selfishness that is currently the most powerful driving force in the world, and we welcome Pope Francis’s initiative in addressing a deeper-lying crisis of values .... The time has come, we believe, for a new Enlightenment or for otherwise overturning current habits of thought and action that only consider the short term’.

The view, in other words, of the Club of Rome is that we cannot solve the world’s problems, we cannot ‘build back better’, using the same way of thinking that got us into our current predicament. This call for a ‘new Enlightenment’ does not of course mean a regression to the anti-scientific thinking of conspiracy theorists and populists. In the terms I’ve been using, it calls for a fuller way of knowing, a wisdom way. ‘Humanity is faced’ the authors write, ‘with nothing less than establishing a new mind-set and a new philosophy’.

The chapter on education in *Upturn*, written by Tanya Plibersek, is almost completely silent on this question. It does speak of the significance of education for enabling the possibility of self-knowledge, skills in critical thinking, creativity and imagination, for inculcating the virtues that support citizenship and community, the love of justice as well as the love of learning. But overwhelmingly, the chapter focuses on the provision of education as a means to the end of a job in a capitalist

system. Plibersek writes: 'The most important reason to get an education is so you can look after yourself and have control over your life: get a job, fill in your tax return, apply for a new Medicare card, read the label on the poison jar'.<sup>2</sup> Of course, these things matter; literacy is a necessary condition of being empowered to participate in our society. Even so, is there nothing more we need to say about the formation of the young in discussing the renewal of the world? What about the getting of wisdom? What about structures in education and in our culture more generally, for enabling real maturation, deep knowing and integration?

David Tacey, a scholar of literature, spirituality and Jungian psychology, tells a powerful story about his school days in central Australia. 'I was much more interested, growing up in Alice Springs ... in Aboriginal culture ... than in my own', he says, 'because I noticed that the boys around me in high school in central Australia would suddenly be taken out of class and taken out onto the initiation fields and they went through various trials of initiation. They would come back into the class as utterly transformed young men, and I was very impressed by that because I thought, boy, it's very hard to find something equivalent to that in my own culture'.

Forty-five years on, sadly, the power of these indigenous rites to transform the self is not what it was. Tacey says 'the tragedy is ... that the wisdom exists about how to transform an individual person by rite of initiation or rite of induction into tribal law, but it is not having the effect now that it once did'. Modernisation and secularisation is impacting indigenous culture too, just as it has 'those rites of passage that still exist technically and formally in [our religious] institutions'. Modern young people may still go through rituals of transformation 'from the churches or synagogues or mosques, temples and so on, but it doesn't seem to bite. There is something missing', Tacey says, 'between the way we live our lives and the kinds of formalised rituals that are on offer'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tanya Plibersek, 'Lesson Learned: Education in Recovery' in *Upturn: A Better Normal After Covid-19*, ed. Tanya Plibersek (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2020), p.157.

<sup>3</sup> Transcript of interview with Rachael Kohn, 'Spiritual Sickness' on *The Spirit of Things*, 17 April 2011, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/spiritofthings/spiritual-sickness/2998984>

‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’. All the initiation rites of the world are about the death of an ego-ic, self-sufficient self, and the breaking into a new sense of connection to the whole, a wisdom perspective. Yet, we seem to be losing access to traditional ways in which that was enabled. At present, in the West, whether or not people discover this deeper dimension seems completely ad hoc. As children and adolescents, some are gifted with teachers who themselves have a rich interiority, who share practices of stillness and attention, and whose own lives witness to the deeper possibilities of human being. But many aren’t. And it is no part of the routine process of adult formation in our culture to be inducted into a journey that goes down as well as up. In fact, the reverse is true – we seem to have massive cultural mechanisms in place for rewarding immaturity and avoiding at all costs the death of the ego-ic self. As far as I can tell, in Christian circles at least, having a mid-life crisis and discovering Richard Rohr seems to be main route available! Once you stumble into it, of course, there are teachers, there is wisdom; we know how to do this. But somehow discovery of this wisdom is left to individuals. Unlike earlier societies, there is little in the form of our public life that talks about it, creates contexts for it, encourages the undergoing of it. Is this how it must continue to be?

Certainly, the process of transformation does not happen by demand. It cannot be wholly systematised or controlled. ‘When the pupil is ready, the teacher appears’, goes the Eastern saying. But I don’t believe this recognition entails the complete privatising of the depth dimension of the human journey, and so the separation of this wisdom way from public discourse and from conversations about the remaking of the world. Given that all our lives depend on it, this doesn’t seem entirely satisfactory!

Well, I don’t have solutions – but I think these are questions we need to ask, a conversation worth initiating, and again, I’d really love to hear your thoughts on this. In the meantime, in a time of the cultural forgetting of wisdom, perhaps a key task for a community such as ours is simply to continue witnessing to that realm and

possibility, awakening others' curiosity and desire to know it for themselves.

Nicodemus came to Jesus, as it were, hiddenly, by night, saying: 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God'. That's where it began for him. In the same way, perhaps we may dare to hope that our commitment to the work of transformation and the getting of wisdom will in turn become a point of access for those among whom we work and live these days.