

Benedictus Reflection 22.06.24

2 Cor 6:1-13

One of our sons is a stand-up comedian in Sydney. He has a day job to pay the rent but spends several evenings a week at smaller and larger venues around Sydney plying his trade. Growing up, he particularly liked the Simpsons and Seinfeld, and later, the sitcom that came from one of Seinfeld's writers, Larry David, called Curb Your Enthusiasm. These were all long-standing and popular sitcom shows watched by millions. Recently, our son said to us that the key to a successful, long term sitcom character is that they never learn, never grow, never change. In all the different situations in which they find themselves, they just keep reacting in their habitual ways, making the same mistakes over and over, and never learning a thing.

Larry David makes this explicit in the twelfth and final series of Curb Your Enthusiasm. At one point he says: 'I've been expecting more from myself my whole life, and it's just not there'. And in the final episode, he says to a small child, as if he were about to impart some wisdom: 'I am 76 years old, and I have never learned a lesson in my entire life'. And you get the feeling that's not about to change.

I am starting with these comic characters, as a contrast with the character I will talk more about tonight, St Paul, the writer of our scripture reading. What I am going to do is set up a spectrum, with these comic characters at one end, who never learn, never grow and never change, and St Paul at the other, who went through profound and radical changes in his life, and who urged others to 'be transformed'.

And what *you* are going to do is work out where you are on this spectrum – between Larry and Paul.

Don't worry. I'll help you.

We've spent a bit of time with Larry. Now let's turn our attention to Paul. Most of you know his story, but for those who need reminding, or need telling, Paul first appears in the Book of Acts as the young man, Saul (Acts 7: 58 – 8:3; and 9: 1-30). The early church, known as The Way, was being persecuted, and Saul participated in that. He was at the stoning of Stephen, a disciple and preacher, 'And Saul approved of their killing him'. (Acts 8:1). He 'breathed threats and murder' against the disciples of the Way and sent them bound to Jerusalem to be

tried (Acts 9:1). He was zealous for the law and saw the emerging church as a threat to the Judaism that he knew and loved. Saul assumed it was good and right to defend his faith to the death.

He was on this mission when he decided to go to Damascus. Something happened to him on the way that completely changed him. We are given a brief account of the outer story, of what happened to him, but we are not told what went on in his internal life that made such an impact. We will have to work that out from his response, his writings and his ministry.

On the road to Damascus, he saw a flash of light and heard a voice saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me’? He fell to the ground and asked who was speaking, and a voice answered, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’. Saul was blinded by this experience and had to be led into Damascus by hand. There, he was put in touch with disciples of the Way that his sight might be restored and that he might receive the Holy Spirit. He was then baptised and began to proclaim in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. From there on, Saul became a new person, later called Paul. From trying to destroy the church, Paul became an apostle to the Gentiles, establishing and building up churches.

We can better understand the profound and radical nature of Paul’s conversion, by contrasting it with the comic characters with whom we began, who never learn, never grow and never change. If they had met Jesus on the road to Damascus, how would they have reacted? Put another way, ‘What would Larry do?’

Now, it would not surprise me if Larry did switch his allegiance from whoever he was with before, over to Jesus, but he would do so only out of self-interest. He might say to himself something like: ‘I don’t want to get spooked and blinded every time I go to Damascus. What the heck, I’ll say yes, just to get him off my back’. So, he might switch over to Jesus, but he wouldn’t undergo a conversion. His character wouldn’t change.

Comic characters are a bit like mercenaries – they are loyal to whomever they can gain the most from, but otherwise, they keep doing what they do. If Paul were like this, then he might have gone over to the side of Jesus, out of self-interest perhaps, but because he persecuted people before, he would persecute people again. He would just have a new set of friends and enemies. Like a mercenary.

But that is not what happened, is it? Paul did change his allegiance over to Jesus, and we know it was a genuine conversion, because he stopped persecuting altogether.

What happened? What did Paul come to understand on that road? I wonder if the blindness he experienced from his encounter with the risen Christ was an outer sign of his inner blindness. He had thought that to be zealous for God meant he had to persecute his enemies, that somehow God wanted that, and needed protecting. What he came to see through his blind eyes, was that this Jesus was the one that the early church proclaimed as the Son of God, and if that was the case, and *Jesus* did not persecute his enemies, how could persecution be good and right? God had been among them, in human form, and was a person of humility, peace, forgiveness, and grace. He had confronted Paul without malice, punishment or retribution. He did not breathe threats and murder. Therefore, Paul had to radically change his theology, his view of what God was like and what is required of us to live into the Way of God.

Once Paul glimpsed this new way of seeing, the scales fell from his eyes, and he received the Holy Spirit. Even though his old friends were now out to kill him, he did not respond in his former ways. He had learned that God is not violent and punitive. How could he continue to live that way himself? Such a shift in his understanding and practice would have taken some time to work out, and that seems to be what happened next.

In Paul's own account of his conversion, in Galatians 1(13ff), he 'went away at once into Arabia' then afterwards he returned to Damascus. Then after three years he went to Jerusalem to meet with Cephas and James and travelled through the churches of Judea. We don't know where he returned to, but he says, 'Then after 14 years I went up again to Jerusalem'. That is one, long retreat. From there, he began his ministry proper. I mention this because it seems there was a long formation period for Paul. He was not converted on the road to Damascus as a once and for all event but had to undergo deeper and deeper conversions of his whole self, that he might be more fully aligned with the Way of Christ, the grace of God, and the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

How are you going with that spectrum? Larry.....Paul. It's hard, isn't it?

My guess is that, if you are listening to this Reflection, you would already be somewhat open to learning and growing, and on the way of transformation. So,

we have moved away from Larry to some extent. But I also guess that there might be some scope for each of us to move closer to Paul, and the radical transformation of his character.

Not many of us will have been former zealots who breathed threats and murder against those we disagreed with. However, the transformative path that we are called to in the Christian faith addresses each of us, whoever we are, as individuals and communities, so that all aspects of our lives might be brought more fully into the way of God's grace.

And how might we do that? Paul helps us in the reading we heard from 2 Corinthians 6.

First, Paul urges his readers not to accept the grace of God in vain. This gift was costly. If you accept it, then let the grace of God do its work in you, through the Holy Spirit.

Second, Paul details the hardships he has endured to bring the good news to the Corinthians and other churches. There is no sense here or in other places where Paul talks of his tribulations, that he has understood them as a punishment from God. He now knows that God is not punitive. Rather, he has endured suffering from punitive human regimes: beatings and imprisonments. He gives further details in this same letter (2 Cor 11: 23-9): he was imprisoned numerous times, was given the 39 lashes 5 times, as well as being beaten by rods, and once received a stoning. What he used to do to others is now being done to him, but he is a changed character. What makes him respond to these punitive human regimes with 'patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God'? It is because he knows of a better regime and is thankful that the goodness and grace of God are in the world. The kingdom, or reign, of God is marked by kindness and compassion, mercy and forgiveness, justice and liberation. It is in glorious contrast to human regimes built on violence. So Paul, knowing this, is 'yet always rejoicing' (v.10).

Other hardships Paul mentions are just the calamities of life on his journeys: shipwrecks, dangers, hunger and cold (cf 2 Cor 11: 25-7). Again, Paul does not see these as any kind of punishment from God either, since he knows God was not punitive. But they were hardships that he gladly endured because the good news he had to bring was worth it all. And he wanted the church at Corinth to understand that. The grace of God is worth all the hardships – so respect that and don't accept it in vain.

Paul is presenting himself to the church in Corinth as an example of one who lives by grace – that is, according to the marks of what a Spirit-led life looks like, and enabled to do so by the Holy Spirit. He wants them to know and realise the value of this gift. And to do that, he has opened wide his heart to them, in friendship and love. It seems they are struggling to respond in kind. Maybe there is a bit of Larry in them. They don't want to grow up or change. But if they did open wide their hearts, they might find the grace and peace with which Paul first greeted them.

There might be a bit of Larry in all of us, when we resist learning from our mistakes, growing up, or being drawn and inspired by God. And I do think we need to have compassion on ourselves and others when we are not living our best lives. We are only human. We get tired. Some days are tough. What I have learned from reflecting on this text, is that Paul encourages us, through all our hardships, to remain open to the possibility of God's grace working in us, open to learn, to grow, to change. And we don't do that with closed minds and hearts.

Let us open wide our hearts, that the Spirit may live more fully in us, and lead us further into God's reign of grace and peace.

Amen

Heather Thomson
22.06.2024