

What seed shall we sow?

Psalm 126

When people find out that I work as a nurse at Mary Potter Hospice I get a variety of responses. Sometimes they tell me the story of someone they knew under the care of the hospice who has died, and how that went for them.

But the most common thing that people say is “Isn’t it a bit depressing?”. “Well” I say “it’s intense and quite emotionally demanding but mostly I feel pretty good when I go home at the end of a shift”. I don’t usually offer much more than that but if I was to put into words how I feel about working in palliative care, it would be something like “Yes, we see a lot of suffering and sadness but also a lot of healing and joy and it’s so good to be part of a team that does all they can to support that.”

I remember when my family gathered together after my Mum’s death, looking out the window to see my brother-in-law’s brother plodding up the path to the front door. He was carrying the obligatory casserole and had his serious “visiting the bereaved family” face on. He got a bit of a shock to see that we were already in party mode having cracked open some Lindaur Rose, put on some music and were sharing memories, jokes and relief that it was all over and had gone well. Mum was an old lady, had led a full life and her death was gentle and seemed natural. There had been times of struggle in the past and many tears were shed later, but in that moment, even as we grieved we experienced unexpected joy.

Sometimes music and memory sharing happens at the hospice too. We open up the drinks cupboard and the trolley is loaded up and pushed clinking up the corridor. Laughter and joking can be heard, praying and singing. As well as tears of sadness, tears of joy can also be shed. It is a beautiful thing to see the love that flows between people at this time of change and loss.

Powerful mixed feelings are also portrayed in the Psalms. In his book introducing the Psalms, Walter Brueggemann has this to say,

“The Psalms offer expressions of praise and prayer that have been found, over the generations, to be recurrently poignant and pertinent to the ebb and flow of human life. Generations of Jews and Christians have found the Psalms to be a reliable resource for the articulation of faith, but also for authentic articulation of life in its complexity”. (Brueggeman, W. 2014 p 1)

So we hear, in a sometimes shockingly direct way, words of anger and doubt, gratitude and praise, lament and complaint, or fear and trust in different Psalms.

Psalm 126, speaks of both joy and sorrow.

A bit of the background to the Psalm can be surmised. It’s one of a group of Psalms called “Songs of Ascent” which were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for agricultural festivals. Some may also have been sung by those returning from exile in Babylon. (Hassell Bullock 2017 p 378)

The Psalmist looks back to a previous time of purpose and possibility, when exiles returned, and Jerusalem and the Temple were being restored, to the amazement of other nations. The present moment is uncertain and fearful, whether because of a literal failure of harvest, or because the work of restoration has stalled. So the

Psalmist prays for a return to the community's good fortune. (Hassell Bullock p 414-5)

This psalm seems to me to have something "poignant and pertinent" to say to us, in our current situation as we are faced with the reality of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Let me explain my thinking....

At the end of March 2020 New Zealand went into lock down in an attempt to eliminate the new virus spreading round the world. We all learnt new ways of being, staying home, keeping our distance from others and washing our hands. We watched the 1pm update religiously and worked together as part of the "team of 5 million". How long ago that seems now!

But it worked, and by mid June there were no active cases in New Zealand. The restrictions eased and people enjoyed their first takeaway, returned to work and began socializing in person. We were indeed "like those who dreamed". "Our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy".

Despite some local lockdowns in Auckland and Wellington, and the restriction of overseas travel, it was almost life as normal.

And we were in truth the envy of other nations. They might not have used the words "the Lord has done great things for them", but we were known throughout the world as one of the few places where COVID was not rampant.

But now that has changed, and like the psalmist we are unsure and fearful. We long for our fortunes to be restored.

So what hope does Psalm 126 hold out for us? Is it possible that there are words that we can lay claim to that will support us in this time of change?

Looking at the second half of the Psalm, the answer is a resounding "YES"! It is a prayer and an affirmation that lack will be transformed into abundance and weeping into joy.

I'd like to take some time to ponder this in a bit more depth...

I love the image of seeds and tears being sown at the same time. I can see the tear-shaped seeds and seed-shaped tears mingling, as they drop into the newly receptive ground. As well as sorrow and care, there is a sense of possibility in that image. What may be happening, unseen in the earth that is yet to appear? What green shoots will peep above the surface in a few weeks to become a rich crop?

An equally powerful is the image of verse 4.....

"Restore our fortunes, O Lord,

Like the watercourses in the Negeb".

The Negev is a desert in southern Israel. It was known for its extreme aridity and occasional rainstorm which allowed the desert to bloom. This speaks to me of connection to a greater source of nurture and sustenance. Growth is not dependent only on the small drops of moisture in precious tears shed, but on generous and unexpected rainfall. The vision is that our small efforts are part of a glorious

abundance. There is also a hint that this energy could be rather wild and untamed. (Cogan, M. 2010)

Reading around this topic I discovered something interesting. A people called the Nabateans settled in the Negev Desert in the 6th Century BCE.

The Nabateans built a series of cisterns and terraces which channeled the runoff water from hillsides and dispersed the water which rushed through the natural watercourses during occasional rainstorms. This allowed them to grow crops, build settlements and develop a civilization that lasted until the 7th Century CE. The desert truly bloomed! (Hillel, D. 1996)

A larger dream perhaps than the Psalmist could ever have possibly imagined!

Reflecting on all this, I wondered what seeds of potential we could plant during this time? How can we tap into and channel the sources of spiritual energy that are available to us in our tradition?

Sitting down to our rather sumptuous congregational brunch with everyone a couple of weeks ago in the Hall, I was struck anew by people's energy and enthusiasm. Perhaps it was our weeks spent in online church that made me appreciate you all so much, as we gathered again together physically. The wide variety of ways in which people in this community contribute to others is truly amazing. Listening to people talk though, I was equally aware that some of us are also struggling with health and family issues, separation from loved ones, broken hopes and uncertain futures.

So this is by way of being an apology and explanation for the list of seven tips or suggestions that I'm going to share with you in a minute. Sometimes extra things to do can feel like just one more burden, so please take only what you find useful from these tips. I just find that I need some practical suggestions to ground me in my faith.

These guidelines come from the wisdom of Ignatian spirituality. They point to some actions we can take that may move us towards hope. They are the spiritual equivalent of the bricks and mortar that the Nabateans used to construct their cisterns and terraces. Who knows what harvest may be produced as they allow us to access and share what is needed for nurture and growth? My prayer is that they will indeed be conduits of compassion to sustain us and flow out from us during difficult times.

1. Remember who you are as a unique person who has been loved into existence by our creator.
2. Keep the channels of communication with the Sacred (whatever that means to you) open and honest.
3. Live in the now with all its challenges and invitations.
4. Accept the new spirit for this new time, acknowledging mixed emotions while being open to discovering inner resources that will equip you for the future
5. Discern in community for mutual support and to find a way forward.
6. Share hope by serving others. Start small!
7. Envision and embody the dream of justice and peace for our world, a dream sustained by the Holy. (Ruiz 2021)

I'd like to end with the story of a hymn. It's a hymn that expresses both deep sorrow and deep joy.

We'll listen to it in a moment as we spend some time in quiet thought.
But first here's the story behind it.....

The hymn "It is well with my soul" was written in 1873. Horatio Spafford, an American lawyer and businessman wrote the words and Philip Bliss, composer and evangelist, the tune. Both men experienced great tragedy in their lives. Spafford lost all he owned in a fire and shortly afterwards his four young daughters drowned at sea in a shipping accident. This event prompted Spafford to write the hymn words. Bliss and his wife died in their mid-forties in a train accident, leaving behind two sons under the age of five. Bliss named his tune for the hymn "Ville du Havre" after the ship on which Spafford's children drowned. Here's the words of the first verse.

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

So as we live through this time of change and uncertainty, may the peace of God attend your way and may you know, deep within you that it is indeed, well with your soul.

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