

Weekly Reflection

Pentecost 8B, Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

Beyond the superficial body and ego!

On we go, the blurring of the body and the cheated soul [our inner life, spirituality]. Why did no- one tell me to provide for it? Everything I have has been the outward show. Everything I have belongs to Time. Art? Don't be silly. The contemplative life? Where can I get one? What then for my soul [inner life] as Time pulls me on. What then for my soul [inner life].

Jeannette Winterson, Art and Lies

Bruce Bennetts

Today I like to explore one of the apparent paradoxes of faith and hopefully I don't confuse you. There are 3 ideas I would like explore that I saw in coming out of today's readings:

First is embodiment and the importance of physicality and what does that mean?

The second is how do we move past the superficiality of the physical and the real challenges we have in today's society.

And the third point is how do we see past the superficial of our own egos and who we think we are - this is probably the most difficult concept but hugely important.

So let's start with embodiment which is linked to incarnation, a huge topic. A definition of embodiment is a tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling. This important as often our religion or religions in general can have another worldly concept or that it is all about what we think in our head.

In the passage from Mark, we see that the disciples have returned from being out on the road in pairs after Jesus sent them out. They are back now excited but tired. Everyone one is pressing in on them for attention. Jesus sees their tiredness and says "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.". Jesus saw their need and understood that they were human and physical beings, our bodies have needs. He understood this because he was human. He got tired and hunger. Jesus doesn't say "toughen up princesses". He responds to their tiredness. Jesus cared about the physical needs of the body. Jesus is saying that the body is good and important. Unfortunately on this occasion their rest is interrupted but again Jesus's compassion for people takes hold. This time he is responding to their need for spiritual food.

However, once this teaching is done, again Jesus's attention is turned back to the physical needs of the crowd. They were hunger and Jesus responds to their need. This is the story of the feeding of 5000. I don't believe that Jesus performed this miracle to show people he was divine, though in the end this does happen, he does this because of their need.

A large part of Jesus' good news is God saying to be human is good, the physical world is good. So good in fact the God was happy to become part it. I have heard it said the God loves something by becoming it. Jesus and God are saying trust reality and the physical world. This is the embodiment of God. There is a strand of Christianity which has the thinking that the body is bad and that we have to hang on and fight it, so that we can escape into heaven. I think they are missing the point and don't understand what Jesus is telling us.

There are many, I would be one of them, who would say that the central theme that Christianity brings to the table of truth is the incarnation. The incarnation tells us that God is embedded in the physical world and John highlights this in the beginning of his gospel when he says "In the beginning the word became flesh". God, Christ has always been in the world but many of us humans are slow to recognise this. In Jesus, God went that extra step at really show us humans that the physical universe is good.

This thinking should spill over into how we consider the physical world. It is tempting to see the world as separate from God and from us, that world around us is not really that important and what we do to it doesn't matter as it is only heaven that counts. It is important for us to be seeing our oneness with the physical world. We are connected to all around us through Christ, the people, the animals, the plants, the rocks and earth. Indigenous peoples are much better at seeing this than we are. We have much to learn from them and their connectedness to country!

To quote my favourite, theologian Father Richard Rohr, "How can we reclaim the joy of our bodies – embodying with joy and gratitude for the magnificence of very "ordinary", non-skinny, yet fully alive and wonderful human bodies?"

Our physicality is important and our responses, our emotions are important, we are not just brains on top of a stack of bones. We need to feel our faith, in movement, in dance, the satisfaction of a good meal shared with family and friends, the embrace of a hug, or the kind touch. Clive spoke about the importance of touch several weeks ago and again in the Mark reading we can see the power of touch when all who touched Jesus were healed. It is amazing how you feel live when you dance. We had the pleasure of dancing at Emma Gray's wedding before COVID put us back into the non-dancing mode. When we are given to permission or freedom to dance, it is clear how much we enjoy it even when we aren't that good. I know that the dancing was one of the highlights for Mario and myself

The lockdown has emphasised how much we are physical beings, we miss the touch of others, especially if we are living alone. Zoom is good but we missed the physical presence of others.

However, when do recognise our physicality or our embodiment, we need to move beyond the superficiality of the outer appearance which is difficult as this is preached to us everyday by marketing and social media. There is a perfect image of the body which has been grabbed by marketers and the pornography industry. In the end we objectify the body. Women's body have been objectified by the advertising industry and we have all bought into it, men and women. It is something to be owned and lust after particularly by men. We have an idea of what a female body should look like: it is thin,

blemish free, no hair under the arms or on the legs etc . Much of it is not real as the images are touched up. How many women have whipped themselves because they can't live up to this or that age has made it impossible? We have put ourselves through unrealistic diets or have resorted to hiding our bodies in forms of clothing and makeup or by cosmetic surgery because we are embarrassed by them. We have seen the rise in anorexia and other eating disorders. How many men have worried about losing their hair over which they have no real control or that their hair is greying. Huge industries are built around the concern on physical appearance.

Jesus is saying to us, we don't need to be ashamed. There is starting to be some push back to the exclusive objectification of female bodies and sadly some of it has gone into saying we mustn't discriminate so we should objectify men's bodies. The oiling up of men's bodies. Norway is starting to push back against some of this and bringing in legislation to say that where images have been touched up and blemishes removed that this needs to be stated in the images. The focus on physical appearance is huge and this has been ingrained in us from birth. If this topic interests you there is a great podcast on The Liturgists on body images

On to my third point:

We need to see beyond the superficial, both the physical superficiality of trying to look good, but we also need to recognise the superficiality of that our ego is throwing up. We have an image to maintain which is more than just our physical appearance. This image is often described as the small self and it is different to our true self. To see through our small self is more challenging than trying to see through the superficiality of appearance. The true self is created in the image of God which we are constantly reminded in the scriptures that this is our identity. The true self or our true essence is indestructible and is not connected to our ability or our lack of ability or age, young or old. Our true self is not touched by disease or sickness. We can devalue ourselves when we are ill and think we are less lovable to God.

This journey to discover my true self, is one that I have just started. Our ego is keen to see ourselves as a separate identity and particularly separate from God and others. Having an ego is essential and impossible to avoid. In the first half of life we are mainly trying to work out who we are. However, we need to see what our ego is doing. In my life I have been gifted with a good intellectual ability that I have been able to use in my field of genetics and I have been quite successful and have been given the title of professor. There is nothing wrong with this and hopefully I have put this ability to good use but my ego is saying you deserve this and aren't you valuable because of this role and if you stop you won't be as valuable. I have slowly come to the realisation that my cleverness or my ability is not my true self, my true essence or true self is beyond this and would be there even if I was never given this opportunity to be a molecular geneticist. For each of us our egos are saying different things. My worth is because I am good at business or I am good at theology or I am good helper or I am good at getting things done.

I have also found that I have taken pride in my calm disposition and ability to keep the peace. I can usually diffuse a tense situation though it is often at my own expense. I would have once said that is me and considered it who I am. I would have said it is the central me and that my worth is connected to this calmness. However, when I dive deeper, I can see that this is a defensive mechanism, and that keeping the peace is a

protective mechanism, one my ego has used to help me cope. It is not a bad thing and we all will find ways to protect our self through the different methods. Vladimir and some podcasts are helping me to explore this, particular through the use of the enneagram to help understand myself and how I can grow spiritually but the enneagram is beyond this reflection. I raise this as it is another example of how we need to see beyond the superficial.

Now why is it important to try to see and understand our true self.

I believe it is vital if we are to see our true worth, in the eyes of God. Unfortunately most of us have wittingly or unwittingly bought into a value system that devalues us. This becomes more obvious as our ability wanes, or illness affects us, or our weight makes us hate ourselves or our age makes us less able to do things or we think of ourselves as too young. We don't see ourselves as lovable or that we are less loveable than before.

I also believe it is vital if we are to see the true worth in others, particularly in people with disabilities, are they lesser people or the poor or the abused or those who are too young or too old, or those with opinions we can't stand, or in people who follow other faiths. Or if we are sick or ill, are we a lesser person?

One of the interesting things that I have found out about the true self or our true essence or how we are created in the image of God, is that we aren't a separate self, which is what our ego wants us to believe. In fact our true essence lies in connection with others and God. We are one in Christ. This is an insight that Paul was very quick to pick up. We can see this throughout Paul's writing and in the Ephesian passage "consequently you are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens with God's people". This brings us back to the embodiment

I am keen to explore these things more deeply, and I hope there is a desire for greater spirituality in our congregations which is not the same as more knowledge. I think the path towards this lies in contemplation and reflection. The Western church has not been strong in resting in the mystery of God. One exciting idea to help in this journey is from Ruth in our congregation who raised the idea for a mid-week Taizé service. Then another possibility is we could do some mediations group, like what Sarah Bishop is doing. If you are interested or know people who might be interested let me know by email. I would like to see this as part of our new exploring with the other congregations in the Parramatta region, Northmead, Centenary, Westmead and the Fijian congregation.