

“Where Might We Look?”

(John 12.24-25)

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Introduction

I love this story from the Sufi tradition...

Ali is walking home one night when he comes across his friend Nazridin, crawling around in the grass under a streetlight... obviously looking for something. Nazridin explains that he's lost his house keys... So, being a good friend, Ali gets down and helps him look. But after 15 minutes of fruitless searching, Ali asks... “Are you sure you dropped them **here**?” “Oh no,” says Nazridin, “I dropped them over **there**”... pointing some distance away, to the shadows by his house. An exasperated Ali says, “So why are you looking here?” “Oh, that's simple,” says Nazridin, “There's more light **here!**”

It's a simple story – if you're searching in the wrong place, you'll never find what you're looking for, no matter how hard you try.

I wrote this sermon in the aftermath of last weekend's referendumⁱ... disturbed about 'where next' for our First Nations people... and dismayed about what the process revealed about Australian society.

I want to believe that most Australians desire a nation that is fair and just... and compassionate and generous hearted.

But if *that's* where we're looking – that media spot-lit place of 'winning at all costs'... that space which seems to legitimise any amount of deception, denigration, bullying, and ugly behaviour – then I fear for our future.

So... where do we look now?

(I'm asking that more in despair... in heartbreak... rather than confidence.)

It was in this heart that I sat to write on *James, Brother of our Lord*... leader of the very early Church in Jerusalem. Like most of these early saints, we know almost nothing about him... except that his life ended in martyrdom. Tradition tells us he was stoned...

James, Brother of our Lord, **martyr**...

And it was that word **martyr** that drew me in. “Write about this” the Spirit said...

Martyrdom

Martyrdom is a strange concept for a 21st century Church, whose recent history has been privilege and comfort. We have a few WW2 martyrs in our calendar, but even that's a long time ago now. Martyrdom is certainly *not* front and centre in our life.

Whereas it was at the very heart of the early Church... their experience, theology, and spirituality.

The experience came from successive waves of violent persecution in the first centuries of Christian life.

Naturally... necessarily... the Church turned to the words of Jesus to make sense of their suffering. This text in particular...

“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.” (John 12.24)

They saw their martyrdom as part of the sacrifice of Christ for the liberation of the world.

The theology and spirituality of martyrdom is complex and expansiveⁱⁱ... but in tonight's sermon just these two points...

As gruesome as martyrdom was – real fear, real pain, real death, real grief – this sacrifice was never the ultimate tragedy that we might distantly see it as.

In the Jewish understanding, sacrifice was always about the *release* of the victim.ⁱⁱⁱ Not only were the martyrs ushered directly into the glory of God, but in their death, their own glory was revealed.

It was not personal destruction – the wiping-out of who they were – but rather the release, the emergence of the martyr's true beauty and full potential.

And the benefit to the Church from this life-offering was immeasurable.

The early Church believed that the blood of the martyrs was literally the lifeblood, the fuel, that empowered the life, the vitality, and the growth of the Church.

Martyrdom released the life-energy of the Christian movement. Their sacrifice joined with Christ's self-offering, to be the spirit-energy of the Church.

They saw their growth as Church according to those words of Jesus... (paraphrased)

“Listen carefully... Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and (effectively) dies, it remains what it is... a single grain, a dry unprepossessing thing. But if it dies... the fecundity, the fruitfulness released is fabulous. What it becomes is nothing short of miraculous.”

The Church of the martyrs says to us – a comfortable, privileged, but oh so lost and broken Church – they say to us...

‘In your time of need, in your time of despair and desperation, look into the shadows of what we learned at the very beginning of our life... 2,000 years ago. Look here!’

The New Martyrdom

But isn't there a fundamental disconnect between our experience and theirs?

It is highly unlikely that martyrdom – that is, being executed for our faith – will be part of our experience as Australian Christians in the foreseeable future.

Yes, we are in our decline, losing some of our previous privileges, but society largely treats us with apathy and disdain, not violence. So, martyrdom, thankfully, seems a closed door, a foreign land, to us.

How *could* we look there... to an experience that is not ours?

Well, the early Church travelled this road before us...

For in the 4th century, Christians went from being a persecuted minority, to being *the* privileged centre as the official religion of the Empire. This happened relatively quickly...

Obviously, there was relief at the end of persecution... but the Church was not prepared to lose what it had learned in martyrdom. Sacrifice was still the lifeblood of the Church – Jesus' teaching had not been superseded. (*“...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies...”*)

So, they spoke of a *new martyrdom*... which was to be lived out in lives of radical self-offering.

- Lives marked by a willingness to let go – the very opposite of holding on. Letting go of status... of wealth and possessions... of safety and security. Letting go of one's very self.
- Lives that were radically offered to the service of others... in sacrificial love for the world.

As the institutional Church began its inexorable march to power, status and control, the heart of the Christian movement said “NO... *not that way. Remember the martyrs.*”^{iv}

In our lostness, our brokenness, the early Church, the Church of James of Jerusalem, says...
“*Leave the bright light of power and privilege, (for there’s nothing to be found there)... and instead look here... into the shadows of radical self-offering... the new martyrdom.*”

Conclusion

This is the voice of Spirit that came to me in my despair...

There is no way to the future nation we desire to be, in that media spot-lit place of *winning at all costs*. What we’ve witnessed in these last months can only lead to death. If we desire life, we need to look in a very different place... and that *will* take some significant letting go.

And for our Church – dreaming of being able to hold onto the comfort and privilege of our recent past, dreaming of a future where nothing has changed – **that path is closed**. The path to renewal will necessarily require sacrifice – that is, costly, uncomfortable, and unsettling self-offering from ordinary people like you and me. There is no comfortable easy way forward from here.

And speaking personally, which is the only place I can speak from with any confidence...
In my despair I heard the faith speak to me...

The heartbreak I feel at what recent months have revealed about us – me included – is real and needs to be acknowledged. But despair is not an acceptable ending place...

I do feel tempted to join the spot-lit fray – to squabble and shout, in an effort to win at all costs. But I know that is the way of death, and not worthy of the one I call Lord.

I can only give myself to the Way of LOVE.

Which means a radical letting go of my need to win... my need to *be* right and to be *seen* as right. My need to be listened to, to be heard... to be potent and important...

My need to be safe in my privilege and comfort.

Giving myself instead to a humble life of self-offering.

Nothing grand or romantic, but a simple commitment to make a personal contribution to a nation that is fair and just... compassionate and generous hearted. And if that requires a level of costly sacrifice, then I pray that I might be faithful.

I hear the Church of James of Jerusalem saying, “Look here...”

And I know in their experience of living the words of Christ Jesus (John 12.24-25), they’re pointing to our liberation too... for this *is* THE Way of LIFE.

Jesus said...

“Listen carefully... Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and (effectively) dies, it remains what it is... a single grain, a dry unprepossessing thing.

But if it dies... the fecundity, the fruitfulness is fabulous.

What it becomes is nothing short of miraculous.

(Jesus continues...)

So, if you insist on holding-on to your life, desperately trying to keep everything just the same, then you’ll end up losing the lot.

You’ll lose even the little you have.

But if you let it go... just let it go...

if you let it all go... reckless in love...

then you’ll find life opening up before you.

And I mean REAL LIFE... abundant and without limit.”^v

ⁱ I was certainly disappointed in the result and devastated for the great majority of First Nations people, especially the senior leaders, who had put this proposal – as a gesture of reconciliation – to the Australian people. But in preaching, my focus is on what the whole experience revealed about the current heart of our society.

ⁱⁱ Being parish priest of a church dedicated to St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, meant that I did a certain amount of study on this, in order to preach something ‘different’ over the ten years I was there.

ⁱⁱⁱ Not the punishment or destruction of the one being sacrificed.

^{iv} The Desert Fathers (and Mothers) movement, the thousands of Christians who went to the desert to live a radical life of prayer, was the heart and centre of this *new martyrdom*. It was a big part of the attraction.

And it was this movement – this saying NO to the path of power and status chosen by the institution – that built the early foundations of the contemplative tradition... the tradition that I live-in and follow today.

ˆ Mainly *The Message* but with some *Laughing Bird* as well.