

Reflection Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September  
Philippians 2:1-13

Mary Oliver famously wrote a poem including what she termed “instructions for living a life”

“Pay attention” she says, “be astonished, tell about it”.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

Simple, elegant, slightly less complicated than one might have imagined.

During our various stages of lockdown, I’ve been thinking in little bits here and there about paying attention. I’ve been noticing things more. Not always, mind you. Often I am side-tracked and distracted and busy. But I have still been fortunate enough to have some small pockets in which to marvel at the sun on grass, golden clouds, the smell of coffee in the morning, falling snow. These moments have given me life, they’ve made me feel human.

I was looking through a giant book I have of Van Gogh paintings. They are, obviously, exquisite, and if you’ve ever seen the real thing you’ll know it’s almost holy seeing the actual brushstrokes made by the man all those years ago as he attempted to capture what was in front of him. And what was in front of him was colour, shape, texture, light, details.

There is one picture particularly that caught my eye as I looked through the book, of a glade of grass and the trunks of some trees. Hopefully this picture has been emailed out to you.

The description of the picture says it best:

“Instead of surveying the full expanse of the outdoor world, Van Gogh’s eye seems arrested by detail. Looking downward onto the grass, he observes the bright greens of new spring grass competing with flickering whites and yellows of blooming meadow grasses and dandelions. He also depicts, with something like wonder, the base of a nearby forked pine tree, as if seeing it for the first time...”

Vincent, and in fact most artists, writers, creatives, didn’t wander around taking short sharp glances at things and moving on, or worrying about his future (although there was a fair share of that), or not seeing what was in front of him. He could not afford to not see what was in front of him. He could not

afford to not stop and look and simply be with his surroundings. Artists and creative types are often in the habit of noticing, and certainly of telling about it.

I read an article the other day, about daydreaming. How this much maligned occupation can be a way of helping us connect with our own lives. In a world full of things to do, ways to 'connect', content to peruse, to do lists to action, we are often starved for a moment of wool-gathering, or simply being still and having a look around. The author spoke of the simple beauty of the sky or even your bathroom wall, all the very minute but delicious details that make up the paving of the world.

By pausing, noticing, looking around us, we are able to bear witness to what is all around us, to appreciate colours, textures, sounds, shapes, moments.

The other week Luba, a member of our Buninyong congregation and I recorded a conversation about meditation. Unfortunately the audio wasn't quite up to snuff so I haven't shown you all, but we said some interesting stuff. We spoke about how meditation doesn't have to be associated with mystical new age spirituality, or done seriously every day as the sun rises, or completed over 20 minute slots as you sit in a painful cross-legged position.

We talked about how in fact meditation can be quick, momentary, as little or as long as you'd like, and how it can help you move from what Luba calls your 'Monkey Mind' to your centre. For her, and I think for me, centre means the core of you, who you really are.

Your heart perhaps, or simply your inner self.

Meditation, we said, can be like a prayer, and can be as simple as a moment when you step out of the momentum always pushing us along and simply be. Be still. Pay attention.

There are so many things to divert us floating around these days. Even during lockdown. We're competing with messages from the world, from our communities, and from ourselves, which point us toward all the things that need to be done, to be thought about, to be completed, to be bought, to be worried over. We move through our lives jumping from task to task, day to day, and can find ourselves focused on trying to be the people we think we should be, busy, productive, well behaved, compassionate, and can forget who we actually are.

Our passage today gives us Paul pleading passionately with a congregation about Philippi to emulate Christ, to do nothing simply for themselves, but to

remember that they are part of a whole, to look to one another. To clothe themselves in humility, to adopt humility as a way of life. Humility is something we speak about in the church but can I think, confuse with slightly different, bleaker ways of being.

As one of the commentaries I read this week puts it, Paul is telling Philippi to be the community they already are. This is not quite the same as telling them to be still and change nothing; it is a calling back, a reminder of who they are, who Christ has made them.

This passage is pretty famous, particularly the part that most scholars agree is a quoting of a hymn that was likely sung at the time- the Christ hymn. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness

‘though being in nature God, lowered himself and became a human’. There is so much there to unpack. For a start, let me sneak in a tiny Greek factoid- in the NRSV version, the translation of the bible I like the most, and which is widely thought to be the most sort of accurate, or properly representative of the heart of the thing, the word ‘though’ has been dropped in. it isn’t there in the Greek. Which means it should read something more like “being in nature God, didn’t want to grasp at simply being a God, and emptied himself and became human”.

This changes a lot. Where we saw a picture of God forsaking Godly privilege and leaving Godself behind in heaven far away, we now see the image of Jesus humbling himself because the nature of God bends to humility.

Again, to quote a commentary I read this week: “if a single image could capture the character of God in the first creation account, it would be a gracious bow”. All of God’s actions are done outward, moving toward love and brimming with overflowing generosity... God’s nature is humble and Jesus was humbled because it is likewise in his nature. This is the nature we are called to emulate.

Because of its language of the emptying of self, of kneeling in reaction to the glory of our Lord, whose name will be known as the name Yahweh, because it seems to be geared toward self-sacrifice and service, and the word slave is

used, I fear it can lead to the sort of joyless, martyred Christianity that so many still seem to be fans of.

We can feel as if in the face of the command to put ourselves second, to lower ourselves in service to our brethren, our own joy and experience don't matter. They are sacrificed to the greater good of our grovelling in servitude. Our lives are given up.

But the passage also reminds us that Jesus became human, lived a human life. This is the choice he made. We are asked to live the same way, to live a full human life, from the perspective of humility, not death, not dread, not inhumanity. This story isn't about us, but neither is about our emptying ourselves of all that makes us human, all that makes us ourselves.

This passage is a beautiful call, not a call to arms but a call to knees. A singing us into the likeness of the GodMan Jesus, who is the truly human one; living, loving, rejoicing, healing, dwelling in humility and love.

During the last few months I have noticed something about myself. I have lost a little of my ability to connect. At first I could talk on the phone for hours, easily. At first I was very focussed on what could be done, how I could help. But then as time drifted on, and I became the person I was spending time with 24/7, 7 days a week, as the voice I heard most (internally, but not always) was my own, as the opinion that mattered most was my own, as the decisions made all were my own, I became understandably more self-focussed. I noticed myself having to really try hard to stay in phone conversations, having to really pump myself up to make sure I was checking in on friends. As all of us have been home more in various levels of isolation, this reading is both a reminder and a real challenge. When we are out of the habit of connecting daily with people, not bumping up against one another, when isolation has become our new normal and human connection seems like something staged and inauthentic, when we cannot worship together, how do we *be* like Christ?

There is an answer here, or at least something to get us on the road to an answer.

I think this passage might be going some of the way to asking us to pay attention. To stop, to shake off all that pressures us to be a certain type of self, to still ourselves in the face of countless methods of staying connected, in the face of constant media saturation, in the face of our own inner voice reminding us of all the ways we are not quite good enough, and to notice what it is to be a human. That is, notice who we are created to be, to drop to our knees and to

see the world around us from that vantage point, free of the things that distract, deter and destroy.

Paul was trying to encourage this community to be itself, and therefore to flourish, to be a true vision of koinonia, or Christian fellowship. This, he says, will bring him joy. What I want to ask is, will it bring us joy? Is there room in our vision of our community and our church for us to be the best, most aware and most joyful versions of ourselves, free of self doubt and guilt.

What if by standing still from time to time, by noticing what is in front of us, we remind ourselves of who we are? by doing this we remind ourselves what it is that we have in common with one another, and we pull ourselves out of our loops of self-focus, and self-focussed martyrdom and lower ourselves gently down in front of the world as it is and as it could be.

The artists and the creatives pause and try to really see. We know that noticing, paying attention helps us- even moments of meditation and stillness are good for our brains, but more than this they remind us of our place in all of this. Pausing and looking around pulls us out of what is contrived, and reminds us that we are not in control, that we are not the point- the world around us ticks on in squeaks and colours and wing flaps and fur and conversation and cups of tea and sorrow and life, even if we are not offering an opinion. All this is out of our hands, so why not drop to your knees.

If we are all humbled, are we striving for what will make us whole? Are we trying to look like we are good people? Are we longing for more things to complete us?

This is perhaps what it is to be truly human. Our lives aren't about our betterment, wellness, or self-help, but about looking at the world from a position of stillness, and humility, seeing people, creatures, everything for their beauty and worth rather than for what they can do for us.

How can we be like Christ at this moment? Perhaps, as Mary Oliver put it, by paying attention.

Pay attention,  
Be astonished,  
Tell about it.

