

# A New Way of Being

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 30 August, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Kevin Dallas

Pentecost 13A

**Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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This morning's reading from Matthew takes us into perhaps familiar territory in time and place, as Jesus approaches the crucial moment of foreshadowing his capture, trial and ultimate death and resurrection with his disciples.

The special relationship with Simon Peter brings forth an exchange between the two of them, set down in the same passage where Peter expresses his horror at this startling information, only to be told that his expression of love and concern is of the devil.

*"Get away from me Satan".* The words placed on Jesus' lips.

The passage contains those much-quoted words embodied in millions of sermons: *"If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget himself, carry his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

A new way of being

Sacrificial living in the service of others, denying self and being prepared to follow Jesus at any cost.

This scripture reminded me immediately of a little chorus much used in Salvation Army liturgy, way back in my younger years.

The words are: *At thy feet I bow adoring, bending lower, lower still; giving up my all to follow just to do my master's will. Giving up my all to follow just to do my master's will.*

Such lofty and sincere sentiments drove the desire of many called to full time ministry, in a sense the language fixes the era these words were penned in and the intense dedication of the experience. I am certain it was the backdrop to the calling both my parents felt when they entered full time ministry in the Salvation Army training college in the late 1940's.

I am also sure that amongst long term Pitt Streeters there are some who, over a lifetime, have found the essence and truth within these words and calling. A lifetime following the way of Jesus has resulted in having to bear a number of crosses. Serving communities far and wide, beyond the walls of any church building;

I must say, in addition, many family circumstances require a great deal of daily cross carrying.

The conviction that truth and justice prevail is a costly path to follow. However the life giving spiritual strength and resource often manifests a life full of meaning. Drawing strength from a source beyond our own limited resources.

The passage finishes with some apocalyptic statements, in which the authors have Jesus saying to his disciples (Verse 27): *'for the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his father with his angels, and then he will reward each one according to his deeds. I assure you that there are some here who will not die until they have seen the Son of Man come as King.'*

A clear example of the writers of the New Testament expecting the return of Christ within their lifetimes. It did not happen!

As bible scholar Keith Ward has pointed out: *'Particular factual beliefs and predictions in the bible cannot be accepted as inerrant. On the contrary, they need to be revised in the light of new circumstances, so that a deeper significance may be found in them, a deepening and expansion of the spiritual sense'.*

One might say we must plunge into a new river of understanding.

As I sit here in my home in August 2020, recording this first virtual reflection, I am tempted to state that, for many millions around the world, the fact is we have all lost a significant part of our life. Circumstances have suddenly conspired such that we have had to *"give up our life"* as we knew it. For some that does not mean giving up our all! But for many it has and will require a very substantial shift in expectations and sacrifice.

Has this loss of life as we knew it seen an opportunity to shift our spiritual perspective? I am sure an opportunity to discuss and share would solicit wide and varied responses.

I would like to take a moment and share some brief insights gained during my personal journey to live into a meaningful Covid.

At the commencement of the lock down I was rationing my outbound phone calls to family and friends, giving myself time and space to inquire after them and consider their individual circumstances, a quota of 1 to 2 calls a day, perhaps now 1 or 2 a week! Life has indeed changed, the pace and rhythm much slower and restrained.

One of my early calls was to my old friend John Cleary. You might remember John, now retired from his lifetime career at the ABC and the long running series "Sunday Night Live".

I was sharing with John my discovery that, searching the Internet, I had come across a podcast/YouTube channel called: *Unbelievable - The Big Conversation*, sponsored by the UK premier Christian radio station, hosted by a young Englishman, Justin Brierley. He moderates discussions across a broad spectrum: theologians, scientists and historians and atheists have appeared over the ten or so years that the show's been running.

This leads to a stimulating series of wide ranging encounters. For me, personally, at the commencement of lock down this provided a welcome diversion.

One of the early programmes, discussion included a young historian called Tom Holland. As I shared this with John, he affirmed Tom's reputation and recommended I read his latest book "*Dominion - the Making of the Western Mind*" This I happily did, providing even more diversion.

*Dominion* is a book written with great learning, enthusiasm and humour. As one critic has observed about the book:

*"We are so quick to see the gap between sceptic and believer as unbridgeable, yet Dominion widens our focus charting Christianity's enduring impact on the West, claiming much that has been cast as its nemesis - science, secularism, and even atheism would not be possible without it. Ranging from the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 BC right through to the ongoing migration crisis in Europe today. It really does explore what it was that made Christianity so revolutionary and disruptive.*

*By and large the West has become increasingly doubtful of Christianity's claims and yet, despite that, many of its instincts do remain irredeemably Christian.*

It often helps to stand back and broaden our field of vision, to discover and discern just how much this ancient wisdom tradition has contributed to Western civilization.

What do we make of the constant claims of the death and dying of Christianity, when such a distinguished historian claims it's in the very DNA of the Western mind. Try as we might, we can't shake it off. Somehow that story keeps coming back to claim us.

A new perspective on an Ancient tradition

A further discovery awaited when I watched a podcast on *Unbelievable* with the author of a multimillion bestseller called *Twelve Rules for Life - An Antidote to Chaos*. Jordan Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, formerly of Harvard. He's gained an astounding 40 million people who have watched his you tube lectures and he has gained significant following amongst young men between 20 and 35.

The book is a serious work although coming under the 'self-help' genre. Woven into each of the 12 rules are many interesting and challenging biblical references, some profoundly linked to everyday living. To give you a sense of the material, I'm going to quote from rule number 4, which is entitled: "*Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today*".

He writes:

*'Aim high. Set your sights on the betterment of being. Align yourself, in your soul, with truth and the highest good. There is habitable order to establish and beauty to bring into existence. There is evil to overcome, suffering to ameliorate and yourself to better.*

*It is this, in my reading that is the culminating ethic of the canon of the West. It is this furthermore, that is communicated by those eternally confusing, glowing stanzas from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the essence, in some sense, of the wisdom of the New Testament. This is the attempt of the spirit of mankind to transform the ethic from the initial, necessary Thou Shall Not of the child and the Ten Commandments into the fully articulated positive vision of the true individual.*

*This is the expression not merely of admirable self-control and self-mastery but of the fundamental desire to set the world right. This is not cessation of sin, but sin's opposite, good itself. The Sermon on the Mount outlines the true nature of man, and the proper aim of mankind. Concentrate on the day, so that you can live in the present, and attend completely and properly to what is right in front of you - but do that only after you have decided what is within to shine forth, so that it can justify being and illuminate the world. Do that only after you have determined to sacrifice whatever it is that must be sacrificed so that you can pursue the highest good.*

Does that sound a little like Matthew 16 verse 25? And millions have only just put the book down and are attempting to place these precepts into practice and transform themselves from Chaos to Order.

This does not suit all in the Christian community. Indeed, as you can imagine, Jordan Peterson has drawn controversy throughout his life – and certainly from many evangelicals - who specially point out the perceived sidelining of Jesus and the offer of Salvation. Too much dependence on individual responsibility!

For myself, the scope and reach of the scripture being used and interpreted in this way is reaching millions, predominately by a new medium. A new way of being!

Are we dying to an old life, or an old way for Jesus sake?

There is no doubt that so many Ancient Wisdom references confront the reader with the concept of Christianity. I am left feeling grateful that the essence and product of the outcome is a transformational life.

A new way of being

Marcus Borg in his wonderful book, "*The Heart of Christianity*", in referencing the Matthew passage, makes the following observation:

*Sometimes this internal process of dying is spoken of as "dying to self" or the death of self. Subject to misunderstanding "dying to self" has been used to encourage the repression of the self and its legitimate desires. Oppressed people, in society and in the family, have often been told to put their own selves last out of obedience to God. When thus understood, the message of the cross becomes an instrument of oppressive authority and self-abdication.*

He goes on to write:

*But the cross is the means of our liberation and reconnection. It is not about the subjugation of the self, but about a new self.*

*‘The problem is not that we are selves. The issue is what kind of selves we are, and what kind we might be’.*

My final thought comes from that much loved, retired and self-proclaimed sceptic, the former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway. His recent reflections on Life and Death are in a book entitled “*Waiting for the Last Bus*”-- another one of my Covid reads!

Richard Holloway, now in his late 80’s, this distinguished churchman through whose many writings has had a very public relinquishing of his life of belief – or questioning, I should say, not relinquishing. You might say a complete reversal of the evangelical fervour and sentiment I shared at the beginning of my reflection. Or perhaps he just put down one cross to take up another? When you are approaching 90, I guess you are well qualified to ponder issues of life, death and belief?

Quoting from the chapter entitled *Loosing It*, he writes:

*That’s why we should hold our values and moral norms with a sense of their provisional nature. We never know when we’ll want to change them because we have been persuaded there is a better way to organise society.*

Then using a lovely quote from a poem by Louis MacNeice:

*For every static world you or I impose upon the real one must crack at times and new patterns from disorder open like a rose and old assumptions yield to new sensations.*

Holloway goes onto to say:

*Revealed religions find this hard to deal with. Their authors have persuaded them that they are in possession of a divine instruction that, unlike everything else in human history, isn’t subject to change and decay. It’s a mountain not a river. It stays put and never moves.*

We are now being challenged to find the new norm amidst this Pandemic.

A new way of being.

Amidst this changing and challenging time may we also acknowledge the new shoots springing up, not too shackled to the ways of the past, ever aware that that there is a new thing to be done and indeed, a new way of being.

#### References

Dominion: The making of the western mind. Author Tom Holland  
12 Rules for Life. Author Jordan Peterson  
Waiting for the Last Bus. Author Richard Holloway  
The Heart of Christianity. Author Marcus Borg

