

Nourishing Soul, Nurturing Spirit

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 16 October 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Jolyon Bromley

Pentecost 22C

1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24; Matthew 25: 37-40

Contemporary reading: *Bone* by Mary Oliver

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

It's great to discover a modern poet like Mary Oliver who takes on profound themes – like trying to work out what the soul is and taking it through to a resolution which isn't simplistic or too definitive.

Like every great artist in any medium, she is concerned with exploring the inner life. It's an enduring quest - to discover - what it is to be Human; what makes up human inner life, so we can make sense of our own, personal inner experience. In a calm, logical way Mary Oliver explores her understanding of what the human soul could be like.

And what the soul is, also

I believe I will never quite know.

Though I play at the edges of knowing,

There's always a danger in being too definitive, in having a clearly worked out formula for these kinds of things. But what she comes through with is this idea that the important thing is the looking, is the questioning, is the searching – and the touching and the loving.

So Mary Oliver gives us a kind of picture of where we are in a sense today. People aren't ready any more for pre-digested formulated definitions that were offered in the past. People are questioning and exploring and finding answers for themselves.

As a teenager, after reading this passage from Thessalonians I went to my minister with a question. Paul refers to body, soul and spirit – what is the difference between soul and spirit?

I don't remember exactly what he said, but I do know that it did not satisfy me! I think it was something to do with basically they mean the same thing.

On numerous occasions subsequently I've asked people how they understand the difference between soul and spirit and never received a satisfying answer.

Over the years I've developed my own understanding, helped by insights from modern psychology. And just like Mary Oliver, it's not set; it's not firm at all. It's still evolving and it's a personal understanding.

I see the soul as the sum of all our thoughts, feelings and will to act, in our inner life. And I identify the spirit, in the language of Jung, as the Higher Self – the divine spark, the inner light, the source of creative inspiration, the custodian of highest ideals, the Christ in us; it's what links us to all humanity and the spiritual world, and yet, paradoxically it's also uniquely individual in us. For me spirit is always to do with connection – whereas the soul life is all about ourselves.

With this in mind let's explore the relationship between soul and spirit. An imaginative picture of this emerged from the deep wisdom of the mystery schools of ancient Egypt. It's the image of Isis, the world soul, divine wisdom, the eternal feminine; Isis nurturing her young child Horus, the spirit self.

This imaginative picture of the soul nurturing the vulnerable, infant spirit is transformed in Christian iconography into the Madonna and Child. It starts simply by representing Mary, like most mothers, loving and caring for the Jesus child. But the image takes on greater and greater significance as it speaks to some deep human need and becomes an object of veneration. It's the transformed Isis - an imaginative picture of the soul nurturing the vulnerable spirit - within us! This theme found extraordinary expression in the artists of the Renaissance, reaching an apotheosis with Raphael's sublime Madonna and Child, idealised, floating in space.

Previously, the power of this image of the Madonna and Child had gained greater potency in the early Middle Ages when a decision was taken at the 4th Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 869 CE – a decision that echoes down the ages and still affects consciousness today.

At this Council a decision was taken to drop the idea of spirit as an integral part of the human being. That part that directly connects with God in the individual. Henceforth, people would be only body and soul. The spirit would reside in the church. Access to the spirit would be through the church. This concept was not challenged by the Reformation. It's so much about the power of the church over the individual.

There's something satisfying about a trinity that feels more wholistic than a duality. It's strange that despite the teaching that humans were made in the image of a threefold, trinitarian God, humans were only allowed a duality. Therefore the Madonna and Child spoke to the depths of the human soul to make up the deficit. People recognised, perhaps subconsciously, in the Madonna and Child some deep aspect of themselves.

There was a critical breakthrough for me in my 20s when I encountered an understanding of the God within, rather than the God out-there. One could find the spiritual dimension as part of the Self, which seems entirely consistent with Paul's teaching of the Christ within, of us accessing the mind of Christ.

My intention today is to affirm this notion of the God within, the spiritual dimension of ourselves, which is intimately part of our individual soul life but connects us with the spirit present in all creation - and to think about what nourishes our soul life and nurtures our spirit.

I'm reluctant to digress but it's important to acknowledge another aspect of our inner life that Jung called the "shadow or double". It deserves a reflection all to itself but it's important to mention it today because the shadow is so dominant in our culture and in so many people.

Many great works of literature have explored this idea of the shadow, but probably the most profound is Goethe's "Faust", the relationship between Faust and Mephistopheles is seen as an image of modern consciousness and the inner struggle with the influence of the shadow. The shadow is the inner cynic, the negator, the denier of any ideals or meaning in life beyond pleasure. The shadow is the source of all impatience, temper, violence, hatred and fear. It isolates and divides, promoting bigotry, racism, sexism and homophobia. It's easy to be seduced by the shadow into feelings of "us and them."

It's interesting that when Brandon Scott was giving his reflection in this church just a short time ago, he admitted to being a recovering racist, sexist and homophobe. Because, for all of us these thoughts can arise but our Higher Self dismisses them. We all live in a creative interplay in our soul life between our Higher Self and Shadow. Actually we need the Shadow, it gives us freedom, choice; and overcoming its resistance strengthens our spiritual life. Overcoming the Shadow's negative thoughts is a kind of daily exercise. The danger is that it can take over the soul life and create criminals and pervert ideals and create terrorists and fanatics.

It's the Shadow that promotes the idea that the earth is just dead matter to be exploited for profit rather than a sensitive, living organism that sustains us.

One of the roles of the Higher Self is to transform this lower nature but it needs to be nurtured, strengthened by a rich, positive soul life.

To confront the injustices, greed, corruption and destruction of the natural world around us we need a counter-balance, we need to fill our soul life with uplifting, positive experiences. We all have our own personal ways of nourishing our soul life – central for me is connecting with nature, wilderness places and gardens; I love to plant seedlings and daily, as I water them, watch them grow and flower experiencing the creative life forces at work. Great experiences of literature and drama, music and the visual arts stay in our memory filling our soul life with positive feelings. We need to seek them out!

Our spirit can be nurtured through regular personal spiritual practice and collective worship. When we come together we can be actively present in an inner way, consciously open to the presence of the Christ in our midst. For me, Christ is the Spirit of Love in each of us and in everyone and at work in the world – as the Gospel tells us today. As we open ourselves to love we connect with the source which nourishes our spirits.

In the gospel today Christ's teaching is to recognise the need in the other and by so doing recognise the Christ in them. The spirit of love, compassion and connection is in everyone. The gesture of reaching out and helping brings us together with a sense of joy and fulfilment.

*"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these,
who are members of my family, you did it to me."*

Amen.