

Into the liminal space of God's grace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 18 October, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Pentecost 20A

Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22;
Contemporary reading. A poem by Davna Markova

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

It has been on the TV and on the lips of many when addressing the coming out of COVID conditions. Liminal space. You know, that in-between time of transition from the already to the not yet. It is that brief moment in time when there is change in attitude, thought and action.

It is the stopping time from manic activity to a stillness that is yearned for by most. It is the opportunity for space, even to empty oneself of scrambled thoughts. It is the wake-up time from busy-ness and taking the deep sigh, so breathing can happen again.

Even my iWatch alerts me to stop and breathe deeply occasionally, for a few moments. We all have need to enter liminal space, liminal time, liminal life.

We are invited in the in-between time with the scriptures today, just to open our eyes to see God, albeit God's back ... even that is plenty, to seeing the other side of the coin that reveals more than its worth. That is part of what the scripture reading is today.

Moses struggles with the need to see God and have evidential proof to convince others that he is being led by God. He wants to see God's glory.

Jesus has yet another tussle with the religious authorities who continue to question his authenticity and calling by God. Both Moses and the Pharisees are forced to stop and ponder to see and learn again. They are called into the liminal space of God's grace.

Both readings today display a battle of wits, with motives ranging from the want for power and control, to the need for assurance of God's presence, indeed the full glory of God. But there is the constant pull to refocus from manic thinking of planning and achievement to the clarity of awake-ness and to what stillness offers. Liminal life.

We humans are a quirky and vulnerable lot, and we seek that want for being authentic to self, as well as having alignment to an ideal, or cause, or movement with others. We live in that conundrum between wanting peace and tranquillity and busting our gut to achieve it.

How ironic!

Allow me to indulge myself. In the last few weeks, Karyn and I have been watching the entire eight seasons of Game of Thrones. Yes, like so many, our curiosity got the better of us.

For those of you who have never seen Game of Thrones, essentially, Game of Thrones is about the relationship between existing and emerging kingdoms in a mythical land. Some are strong and influential while others are smaller and rely on alliances with other kingdoms in order to survive and wield some influence. There are many battles and violence, sex, blood, gore, and the ugliness of ruthless human selfishness and ways to get what they want.

But the majority of the show revolves around involved conversations that are philosophical and scheming, and strategising how to wield power over other individuals or kingdoms or both. It is indeed a Game-of-Thrones.

All of that was quite captivating, but what intrigued me most was this small community of people who featured for only two or three episodes. These people opted out of the power games of all the kingdoms and simply wanted to live at peace without exerting power over any other group. They wanted to be in their own, peaceful, having a peaceful life, a peaceful existence.

They sought a simple life-style of easy cooperation and co-existence. Any were welcome to join this small community and were encouraged to break allegiance with any previous alliance ... to leave behind the old ways and embrace the new. One could say it was their attempt to live where liminal space was frequent and practiced with respect.

But like so many alternative groups of people, or any who are brave enough to express a contrary stance, they place themselves in a vulnerable space and pay the price from the cruel and violent few. Needless to say, they came to a tragic end. They were all slaughtered – meaninglessly. Why? We don't know!

Game of Thrones can be viewed with any depth of meaning, from a thin veil of simply being entertained, to interpreting with a deeper level where the show is trying to make a commentary of the world in which we live today.

Power of government and institution have always dominated humanity, and where there is challenge to the status quo, the response can be received with either threat or welcome.

This is what confronts Jesus in today's story. He is approached by some scheming Pharisees who want to trap him with a seeming conundrum. He is asked whether it is right to pay taxes to Rome. If he answers yes, he loses favour with the people because they hate paying taxes to Rome. If he says no, he is liable to insurrection against the empire.

The fact that he asks for a coin, suggests that he does not have one, and so the Pharisees who pull one from their purse are unwittingly showing that they are complicit to the Roman system by using their legal tender, and therefore enjoying the comforts of Rome.

The conversation continues with Jesus asking: *whose face and title is on the coin?* And with their response saying: *the emperor*, Jesus then tells them to pay to the emperor that which is the emperor's and to God that which is God's.

It is interesting that the Pharisees are silenced with no answers or comment after that. The obvious question to ask is *“What is God’s?”*. If the conversation delved further with that question, the Pharisees would find themselves in deeper water, because they would have to say, *“Everything is God’s”*.

Hence their retreat. The tables are turned and the other side of the coin is shown. It says: *“When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left Jesus and went away.”*

Jesus, in effect, led the Pharisees into the liminal space of having to rethink their position with Rome, and their relationship with God. We can only echo the response to the Gospel reading where it was said – we heard it earlier on: *“For creative resistance to empire in Jesus’ time and ours,”* and indeed, we can only give thanks.

Jesus could have been harsh with his response, but that would not have enabled the possibility of the Pharisees and others present, to enter into that liminal space of God’s grace.

Entering into a liminal space is a choice, and expression of grace is the prompt.

POEM: *Keeping Quiet* by Pablo Neruda

Now we will count to twelve
And we will all keep still.
For once on the face of the Earth
Let's not speak in any language;
Let's stop for a second,
And not move our arms about so much.

It would be an exotic moment
Without rush, without engines;
We would all be together
In a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
Would not harm whales
And the man gathering salt
Would not look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
Wars with gas, Wars with fire,
Victories with no survivors,
Would put on clean clothes
And walk about with their brothers
In the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
With total inactivity.

Life is what it's about
If we were not so single minded
About keeping our lives moving,
And for once could do nothing,
Perhaps a huge silence
Might interrupt the sadness
Of never understanding ourselves
And of threatening ourselves with death.

Perhaps the earth can teach us
That when everything seems dead in winter
And later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve
And you keep quiet and I will go.

Like the Pharisees and Moses, we too can enter into the same liminal space and discover God’s presence.

The calm waters of rest, the still air of calm, the balm of healing, and the movement of the Spirit that gives life.