

# The Voice

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## Seeing the face of God

*A homily by Teresa Rhodes McGee at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, Croton on Hudson, New York for 19<sup>th</sup> October (Ex.33:12-23, Matt.22:15-22). CMN is grateful to Teresa for permission to reprint her homily as it resonates strongly with our experience of emerging conversations through our Veterans Faith and Wellbeing Support program. Like Teresa, we have also been inspired by a visit from Fr. Michael Lapsley and drawn strength from his faith.*

### The wounds of war

Not quite a year ago, I met my friend Mary for coffee at Starbuck's. I had just completed a research paper on the needs of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mary is a therapist at the Psychotherapy and Spirituality Institute (PSI), which is made up of pastoral counselling centres located at four Churches in Manhattan. We began to talk about the wounds of war that are not being adequately tended by the agencies charged to do so. The Psychotherapy and Spirituality Institute was interested in reaching out to veterans but did not quite know how.

Mary and I have worked together on a number of projects, including a few trips to Latin America where we endeavoured to teach about the impact of trauma among people who have known nothing else for more than 500 years. We agreed

over coffee that we while we did not have any specific ideas about what we wanted to do, we would keep talking, learning, and expanding our networks in an effort to clarify what we might be able to offer to veterans.

Early on in the process, we realized that what we needed to do first was listen. Last Friday PSI teamed with Intersections International and held a first of its kind meeting of veterans, VA and military chaplains, young men recently returned from Iraq, a woman who after 10 years of military service was once homeless with three children and now serves as an executive director of a community based agency for veterans, psychotherapists, educators and an Anglican priest whose work against apartheid resulted in arrest, torture, and a letter bomb that cost him both hands, the sight in one eye, and a traumatic brain injury. We were gathered around a single question: what can we do to bind and heal the wounds of war, regardless of what we think about the war itself?

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### Story telling and listening: a journey onto holy (and healing) ground

It will take us several weeks to sift through the concrete ideas, suggestions, and wise recommendations that we had recorded by day's end. What lingers in my heart, however, as the overarching truth, is that the process itself was healing beyond anything we anticipated when planning the meeting. Like Moses directly speaking and listening to God, we were on the holy ground of the stories that detail the wounds, and yet hold the potential for healing not just of individuals, but of a nation.

Earlier in the week, I had attended a meeting of the International Conference of War Veteran Ministers who have for a long time been engaged in the same sacred process. Gathered in a retreat house where there were signs on the wall that said "SILENCE! GOD IS SPEAKING TO YOU" – a bit of a taunt given that the meeting was in New Orleans and we could almost smell the French Quarter from there – I came to understand that God speaks most clearly through the shared communion of human suffering and rebirth.

What was striking to me at these meetings is that we were, and are, all in it together, despite the endless ways we find to separate our hearts and minds from each other, and within ourselves. A refrain from both meetings was "we heal and are healed together, one set of eyes at a time."

Today's readings provide interesting insights and imagery about seeing the face of God. Moses wants to see the fullness of God's glory and promises that not only can he handle it, he will lead others to praise God's mercy and glory. God's replies "you cannot see my face;

for no one shall see me and live". Then God decides to allow Moses to see God's back while passing by Moses, revealing an incomplete glimpse at one side of God.

Centuries and the history of a people later, the face of God is fully



revealed in Jesus. We then discover that in the ordinary flesh of human beings, God is present with a love we struggle to grasp. God's face is compassionate, broken, strong, loving, appropriately angry, the source of hope, and filled with our human story. When we look in the eyes of God, we find ourselves literally and figuratively, and therein, discover the source of our healing.

This is not always easy to accept, or indeed, to endure. Most of the time, catching a glimpse of the shadow of God's passing is all that we hope for or want. We know from the way we split ourselves apart from others, as well as from our experience of the sacred, that our most familiar, albeit alienating, ways of being defend themselves mightily.

So it is that the Pharisees hook up in today's gospel with the Herodians to try and trick Jesus into saying something worthy of the Roman death penalty. They are hoping for a "gotcha" statement against the occupying government of Rome, if not Caesar himself.

This question is asked not in a spirit of inquiry, but out of malice. Jesus answers them in a way that reframes the question within the overarching authority of God.

It is a clever response, to be sure, and one that sent the questioners away amazed, but it also points to and foreshadows the true revelation of God that comes in the succeeding passages of Matthew's gospel. We will soon hear in response to another set up question about resurrection of the body that we are cared for by the God of the living. Then shortly thereafter we are given the commandment to love one another as well as ourselves, nourished by a love that transcends all the ways we would seek to contain it. We see the face of God not in our complicated theories or trick questions, but in the day-to-day act of living in the presence of both unspeakable suffering and holy resilience.

### Graced stories, graced silences

I saw the face of God in the people gathered at the veteran's meetings as we joined stories together in a lament that echoed any to be found in the scriptural canon. We listened to, and made music, which is perhaps one of the most enduring metaphors I know of for the presence of grace in our lives. And

yes, God was definitely speaking to all of us, sometimes most deeply in the silences between our inadequate words.



Father Michael Lapsley, the Anglican priest so terribly wounded by the violence in South Africa, describes his “Healing of Memories Institute” and his work as telling the story of suffering in the context of our whole lives and identities,

recognizing our strengths, mourning our losses, and daring to envision new ways of being even in the midst of a grossly imperfect world. That is what brings us to community and communion, our daily altars of brokenness and strength, God’s own face reflected in the mirrors of our lives.

Earlier in the Exodus story, we were given the image of manna in the wilderness that had to be gathered each day and would not keep in storage. A communion that heals the wounds of all of our wars needs daily attention. We need to lament, we need to sing, we need to dance, we need to look in each other’s eyes each day not with the intention of fixing things, but humbly receiving the human story that breaks our hearts, and roots us more deeply in our common soul.

Life sometimes gives us extraordinary access to that story, as I have experienced over the past several days. I suspect that I will be pondering that gift for some time, trusting that the next steps in the process will be revealed.

What I do know today is that when we pray for peace and an end to war and suffering, we are opening our hearts to the reality that transformation is more than a cease-fire. It is a deep embrace of our humanity in this day, this church, this broken world and the truth that, as June Gordon writes in her “Poem for South African Women”: *we are the ones that we have been waiting for.*

We are the face of God.



## Violence in Advertising – how the end justified abuse of a child’s humanity

by Kate Dempsey

I saw an advertisement on TV recently that shocked me. It was unclear at first that it was an advertisement - or what it was for. Perhaps you too have seen it? In the ad, a little boy is left by his mother at a busy railway station. As the camera comes closer we see that the little boy is genuinely upset and then seriously distressed as his mother apparently vanishes.

The voiceover at the end of these harrowing 60 seconds invites smokers to think how distressed their children would be if they died from cancer and were gone for ever, not just for a minute. The advertisement is made by the Anti-cancer Council and is part of the Quit campaign.

The distress that the little boy felt and showed was clearly not acted; it was real and it was upsetting to watch. I felt the ad was exploitative of both the viewer and of the boy in the commercial. I am not convinced that these ‘shock’ ads work anyway. People who smoke are aware of the risks, but they (perhaps falsely) believe that death will not come to them in this way. This is in keeping with our society’s general denial of death. I wrote to the Quit campaign and to the Advertising Standards Bureau to complain.

It seems that the Quit campaign is so focused on getting an outcome i.e fewer deaths of parents who smoke, that the effect of the ad on those who view it who don’t smoke or indeed the effect on the young boy in the ad were of lesser importance.

It seems these days even in ‘community service announcements’ the ends justifies the means. I wonder what is lost of our humanity when the



focus on ends, outcomes, and measurable statistics allow this sort of distressing campaign to be aired on television?

When I complained to the Advertising Standards Bureau, I found again, ends were justifying means, as there are only so many 'categories' of complaint allowed. There are rules against advertising TO children in unacceptable ways, but no specific category of complaint about the exploitation of children in ads marketed to adults. There is however a category of complaining about ads which are violent. I complained under that category, saying I felt assaulted by the violence perpetrated on the boy in the commercial. I haven't received a response to date from that complaint.

I received a response from the Quit campaign that shows the level of denial of the violence of the ad. I expected them to deny the reality of the distress of the young boy, telling me that it was just acting; instead they agreed it was real, but that since it only occurred for "a matter of seconds" that it was justifiable.

Here is the passage from the Quit letter of response to my complaint:

*"The real emotion Alexander shows occurred when his mother moved out of sight briefly, which was captured by the 5 cameras. While it looks like Alexander was upset for some time, it was really only a matter of seconds. A child welfare representative was present on the day, and at no point did they express concern that Alexander was being made upset or uncomfortable. Alexander was safe at all times."*

Alexander may well have been safe, but how did he feel? There may well have been a child welfare representative there, but his or her inaction does not justify the distress inflicted. It occurs to me that even a few seconds of genuine distress may stay with this young boy and haunt him in years to come. In my complaint to the Quit campaign I invited them to re-think their commercial to be humane and not exploit children. In their response they justified the ad on the grounds that, *"Although this campaign may be upsetting, it is Quit's responsibility to give smokers the best reasons possible to quit smoking and support them to do it."*

The Quit Campaign reasoning is flawed. It is not appropriate to sacrifice the wellbeing of a child for this campaign. The efficacy of the advertising method is itself not

proven. The Quit Campaign has fallen victim to a limited view both of corporate social responsibility and indeed of humanity. Theirs is essentially an argument based on the most 'efficient' means to achieve their corporate goal. It is irresponsible to 'outsource' the welfare of the child to an expert, who must have felt compelled in the circumstances to say nothing. They further limit Alexander's humanity by saying the child's welfare was protected by this 'expert'.

## Film Review

### 'The Lemon Tree'

By Elina Dalziel



Who do you end up identifying with in any film you have seen?

The Lemon Tree is a story of a Palestinian widow who finds that the Israeli Minister for Defence has moved in next door to her orchard. In rapid movement – the security fences are erected and Selma is enclosed and partitioned from her Lemon orchard. This is hers. She has memory long established in childhood cultivating this with her father. Now widowed and on her own, her own existence is challenged beyond her control.

She decides to pursue legal action and is encouraged by her young lawyer. The initial application is to the Military Court, and there are no surprises to see she loses there. She decides to continue to the Supreme



Court. Her relationship with the lawyer develops an intimacy she has not experienced for a long time. This time, the Palestinian men in her community visit her and coerce her to 'be careful' of continuing a relationship with her lawyer who is 'half her age'.

Meanwhile, the wife of the Minister for Defence is troubled by her own relationship with her husband and the conflict with their neighbour,

Selma. The women come close to meeting one another – yet never quite manage it. Both women's lives are constrained by their gender and circumstance. As one looks at the other through a fence, a connection is made, yet never really sustained.

This story is not only about the Palestinians and the Israelis – it is universal and exists in our own country. The need to 'dehumanise the other' in order to justify invasion/occupation, to choose to act when all appears lost, and to continue in the face of multiple opposition, are the pivotal aspects to this film. The final scene is incredibly stark, moving and despairing, a visual summation of the final decision of the Supreme Court.

This is a thought provoking film, with a haunting rendition of the song 'Lemon Tree ...very pretty'.



## The fixer's folly: strategic plans and stumbling blocks on the way of the cross

*A sermon on Matthew 16: 21 – 28  
by John Bottomley*

### 'I can fix it for you!'

One day a colleague came to talk with me about a problem he was having in his ministry. He told me how he was being bullied by his manager in the school where he worked as a chaplain. He suffered ridicule in front of other staff, his ideas for programs were continuously undermined, and from time to time he was subject to abuse by his manager without any apparent reason.

I told him I thought this was an intolerable situation and obviously unfair. I began to make suggestions to my colleague about how he should deal with the suffering and violence he experienced in his work. Today, I see in my response something of Peter's reaction to Jesus' disclosure of the suffering that lies ahead of him.

Jesus had been telling his disciples about the suffering and death that lay ahead of him at the hands of some powerful people. But Peter intervenes and speaks strongly to Jesus – "This can't go on. It's wrong. You must put a stop to it!" is the tone of Peter's intervention. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." (16:23)

You may have noticed a similar dynamic in the current issue of the Church's magazine "Crosslight". Stories of the church's imminent suffering abound – the Synod budget is \$2 million in debt, there are not enough ministers for congregations across the Synod, and it is predicted record numbers of congregations will be disbanded in the next fifteen years.

But Crosslight reports that Synod has acted to reverse this intolerable situation. It has drawn congregations, Presbyteries and agencies into producing a strategic plan blueprint for shaping the future. The "Crosslight" editor declares that the needs of our nation will be neglected if the Church doesn't address these key issues!

There is an earnest intensity to Peter's desire to prevent Christ's suffering. There is a similar desire in my endeavour to rescue my colleague from his anguish. And there is a similar intent in the Synod's plan to rescue the Church from the pain that lies ahead of it.

### **'Fixers' as stumbling blocks to transformative healing**

Yet Jesus' judgment on Peter's earnest desire to help him avoid suffering and death is unambiguous. Jesus "turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'" (16:23) I have heard Jesus' words of judgment addressed to me.

When I discussed my response to my bullied colleague with a person I saw regularly to help me reflect on my work, he asked me why I felt I needed to rescue my colleague from his suffering. As he opened my heart and mind to my actions, I began to understand that my response was driven by my own feelings of distress and anger at what I had heard. My words and actions gave expression to my anger at the injustice and suffering my colleague was facing.

In trying to fix things for him, I was really trying to control my own feelings of distress and anger. So my poor colleague who came to seek support because he was being bullied at work was being loaded with another burden to bear from his so-called helper! I burdened him with the unresolved fear, anxiety and powerlessness I felt about his pain and struggle.

It is no wonder that Jesus speaks so directly to Peter – you are a stumbling block to me! Peter is a stumbling block to Jesus in the same way I was to my colleague – we both wanted to control the situation so we could cope better with our own fears and feelings of upset and anger. As Jesus pointed out to Peter – I had responded at an all too human level. I failed even to consider what God may be doing in the midst of the suffering and pain my colleague had encountered.

### **Judgment as the good news of liberation**

Today, Jesus speaks the same words

of judgement to the Synod that he spoke to Peter and addressed to me – you are a stumbling block to me for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. The contrast between the divine and human mind is striking. The Synod strategic plan says it offers the church a pilgrimage. Jesus also tells his followers that he is taking a pilgrimage, a journey – a journey to Jerusalem. The Synod pilgrimage promises a journey to celebrate five life-giving themes. In contrast, Jesus journey will lead him to suffer and be killed, then raised on the third day (16:21)

Jesus' word of judgment reveal how the Synod planners act like Peter – they want a plan that takes control of the church's suffering and focuses on celebrating life. The paradox is that Jesus says focusing on saving your life is setting your mind on human things, not on God's will. Jesus says the divine journey leads to suffering and death.

Perhaps this is why Jesus first words to Peter sound so uncompromisingly harsh "Get behind me, Satan!" (16:23) Jesus knows the seductive temptation of well-intentioned words, a lesson he learned at the beginning of his ministry in the desert wastelands. Satan is the Prince of deception, the master of self-serving justifications, the spirit that delights in seeing humans make their own needs of ultimate importance, number one!

### **Whose needs do our plans meet?**

And this is exactly what the church is doing in attempting to put a new plan at the centre of its life. The resolution proposed for the Synod is that in adopting its strategic plan the Synod will then guide church councils and agencies to develop their own strategic plans! At every level of the church's life, the central focus will be a plan that seeks life by avoiding the painful reality of the church's suffering and death. This is a church that appears to have lost faith that God is present in the whole of life, even in the midst of human sin and suffering, even in the midst of human evil and death.

Jesus declares that putting our own needs for life ahead of God's plan for redeeming humankind is completely the wrong order of things. So Jesus says to Peter, to me, to our synod strategic planners, "Get behind me, Satan!" "You are not number one. The path you want is primarily to meet your own needs. You need to take up your proper place behind me,

following me if you want to understand God's plan, God's intention, for your life.'

Over many sessions with a mentor, I reflected on my need to rescue my bullied colleague, and my need to rescue other colleagues who have come seeking counsel. I have learned that when I am able to listen to their suffering, and sit alongside them with the confusion and pain, Christ's resurrection spirit enters their darkness and opens their hearts and minds to new possibilities. In some cases, this may mean they decide to leave their place of work. In other cases, they may decide to challenge an unjust situation. I have also seen colleagues open their hearts to God in their confusion and pain in direct and searching prayer, then learn to rejoice in how the Spirit has awakened them to a new possibility or direction. And when this happens, I rejoice with them because I have seen Christ's resurrection power rolling away the stones that blocked their lives.

### **Transformed life, transformed mission**

All of this transforming grace is gifted to followers of Christ. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who want to lose their life for my sake will find it." (16:25)

To follow Christ on the path that leads through suffering and death is to receive the gift of resurrection life. Life cannot be generated from our human plans as the Synod may hope, and as I have too often discovered by my own folly. Indeed my folly has disclosed Christ's judgment on me and on those who seek to 'lift themselves above the mundaneness of everyday life?' by their own efforts (p. 11 'Crosslight'). Jesus' judgment on such folly is blunt. 'For those who want to save their life will lose it.'

Christ's command and word of judgment is strategic plan enough for our Church. But rather than taking our bearing from our Lord's command, the Crosslight editor asks, 'Can our ministers be given the freedom and permission to be more than chaplains to dying congregations?' Here again are echoes of Peter's intervention to steer Jesus away from suffering and death so life will be more comfortable for Peter. But perhaps being chaplain to dying congregations is precisely the



deeply human reality Christ is using to prepare us for the work of God's saving mission in the world.

Perhaps if our church could learn how to minister to the suffering and dying in our midst, we would know how to minister to the suffering and dying of a world in travail. Perhaps we would know how to attend to the dying of species that disappear almost without lament. Perhaps we would know how to attend to the dying of Pacific island land masses and populations as the sea rises. Perhaps we could attend more graciously to the tragic infant mortality rate amongst Indigenous Australians.

Perhaps if we learned how to minister with declining congregations we would know how to welcome marginalised people – migrants and refugees, those with mental illnesses or physical disabilities. Perhaps our national Church would finally learn how to lament the tragic loss of Anzac day and all who died in war, or those killed by their work, or the countless other ways life on this planet is being killed. I know how much my own ministry has been shaped and enlivened by the 13 years I was minister at St. George's, a journey which from the first day was described by the Presbytery as a ministry with a 'dying congregation'.

When my colleague came with his story of being bullied, I thought I was in the midst of a crisis I had to fix. Today I know I was being invited to an act of solidarity by sharing his suffering, as Christ has come in solidarity with me to share my suffering. Because of Christ's solidarity with me I know I am not alone

in my fear and anxiety, and I can testify how profoundly important it has been for my colleagues to know they are not alone.

When my solidarity with them reminds them of Christ's solidarity with them, they know immediately where to look for the path they must follow. On this path you may know you are loved beyond measure by Christ, even at the depth of your anxiety and fears, even in the face of suffering and death. Here is Christ's strategic response and direction that is enough for his Church – the way of the cross that leads to resurrection life!

## Indigenous artist in residence - project report

*This report is reprinted with permission from the 'Geelong Totally and Permanently Disabled Ex-Servicemen's Welfare and Social Club' Spring Newsletter, 2008.*

Since late 2004, three of our TPI members, Laurie Parks, Nigel Wilson and Barry Pearce have been taking part in monthly Contemplative Worship meetings under the leadership of Rev'd John Bottomley, who is the Director of the Creative Ministries Network, a Uniting Church agency, which provides a ministry involving healing, justice and reconciliation to the veteran community of Victoria.

From March until July 2008 the three TPIs were participants in an art project with an Indigenous artist and daughter of a serviceman, who met with them individually, conducting a series of interviews, taking notes and sketches and ultimately painting abstract representations of the TPIs' stories.

An exhibition of this work titled "Vietnam 1968 to 1971, Recollections of three Vietnam Veterans 2008", was opened on Vietnam Veterans' Day 2008 at the UCA Centre for Theology and

Ministry at Melbourne University and continued until the 19<sup>th</sup> September.

Painting titles included "Dust off", "The Long Green", "Tunnel Rat", "Gunner" and "Throw Smoke". 1968 – 1971 represented collectively the years that the three TPIs served in Vietnam.

Nigel stated, "It was a most interesting and moving project to be part of, and to see the finished works was quite enlightening, as even though I often have difficulties interpreting the real meaning of the abstract works, the more that I studied the works the more I felt that our stories had been represented in a wonderful way".

### **Contemplative Worship: South Yarra and Geelong**

Contemplative Worship meets on the second & fourth Sundays of each month at 7.00 p.m in the Church at 15 Cromwell Road, South Yarra. A service for Veterans is also held at All Saints Anglican Church Parish Hall, 113 Noble Street, Newtown on the third Thursday of the month at 10.30 a.m.

Each Service explores God's deep longing for communion with humankind, and is patterned on a journey to 'rest in the heart of life'. In this Service:

Rest in the silence that whispers of divine grace.

Contemplate God's deep desire for healing, justice and reconciliation in our world.

Meditate on a gospel text in the manner of Ignatian spirituality to learn of Christ's intention for your life.

Be supported by prayerful companions in your faith journey.

Enquiries: John Bottomley 9827 8322.