

Healing our Broken Relationship with God

Below are 3 brief examples illustrating 3 of the many pieces of baggage we carry around:

Two senior citizens were discussing their respective husbands over a cup of tea. One said, "I wish I could get Alf to stop biting his nails. It's such a revolting habit." Her friend said, "My Leonard used to do the same. But I managed to cure him of the habit." "Oh do tell me. What's your secret?" "I hid his teeth!"

One of the best things about losing your memory is you're always surprised to find out what's in your sandwiches, if only you could remember where you left your lunchbox.

At the dinner table, a daughter complimented her father on his improved manners. "I'm pleased to see that after so long you have finally learned to put your hand over your mouth when you cough." "I have to," he replied. "It's the only way I can catch my teeth."

Habits, characteristics (e.g. memory loss), and mannerisms! Three examples of what makes us, us. We have a lot more serious baggage too!

Scanning back copies of the Church Times, as I do sometimes, I came across a reflection for the 1st Sunday in Lent, this year, in which the author begins by quoting the words she often uses when preparing candidates for confirmation – questions the angel asked Hagar in the wilderness (Genesis 16:8): "Where have you come from and where are you going?" Questions we should ask regularly but I am not focusing on this morning! However, after some amazing conversations, recently, with my multi-cultural, adult students, many of them strong Christians, about their problems and experiences, some of them sad and very hard, I want to add two questions of my own. What are you bringing with you and what are you going to do about it? What issues, thoughts and experiences about yourself, are you bringing to God? What physical, spiritual, emotional baggage are you carrying and what are you are going to do with it?

Peter and other disciples had returned home to the place where it all began. Discipleship, the upper room and the Last Supper, the cross and the empty tomb are in the past. Peter decides to go fishing, something familiar and comfortable. This is what people tend to do when things gets confusing and difficult. We go back to feel safe, reverting to old ways and familiar thoughts. Going backwards is so much easier than moving forward. Already Peter's life had been full of ups and downs. After boasting he would never leave Jesus, Peter watched at a distance as Jesus is led away, close enough to see Jesus, but not too close to be seen with Jesus. And as Jesus was tried in the High Priest's house, Peter stood outside warming himself by the fire. Three times he was recognized as a friend of Jesus. Three times he denied it. And then the cock crowed.

Back in the boat, imagine what must have been on Peter's mind? He was trying to forget the past three years; he wanted to forget Jerusalem by coming back to his familiar fishing haunts. But he wasn't going to stop thinking about the years he was part of Jesus' ministry, about the highs and lows, the times when he felt he was the big 'I am' and the times he acted naively or spoke impulsively; the times of disbelief and a lack of faith. Then there was the ride into Jerusalem, the last supper, the famous boast he would never desert Jesus, the arrest, the cutting off a guard's ear, sleeping when he should have been awake, the denials, and that unspeakable crowing rooster! Followed by the cross, the empty tomb, the sight of Jesus in the locked room, the imprint of the nails, the echoes of 'peace be with you'. There was no escape. All he could do was to go out and fish.

Perhaps Peter was fishing for answers too. What have I done? What were those three years about? Who was Jesus? Where is he now? What will he do if I do meet him again? Who am I? What will I do now? Where will I go? What will happen to me? Peter knew where he had come from; it was his 'baggage' that was preying heavily on his conscience (I am sure he could have strangled that rooster); he didn't have a clue what he was going to do with these 'issues' constantly going round in his mind. Peter had a lot of issues: self doubt, remorse, guilt, self-pity, missed opportunities. Peter must have been glad that Jesus was alive, but how would their relationship be? Had he really gone too far? He was fishing for fish, yes, but he was fishing for a way forward too.

We have all been where Peter was on the boat that night, maybe looking for our place in life, seeking peace, some sense of understanding and meaning. It is the point when we come face to face with the times when we have done something we really should not have done, or left undone something we really should have done. Either way we have failed. Perhaps too, it is dark because of something someone has done to us, something unkind or hurtful, or circumstances have been cruel. We have been dealt a blow. I think back to those conversations I had recently. Put yourself in Peter's place? Does God still love me after all that I've done and continue to do? Is there still a place and role for me in His kingdom? What happens when I approach Him with the baggage I am carrying?

Then Peter meets Jesus on the beach, a scene that Bishop Tom Wright, in his commentary on John's Gospel, claims is one of the most spectacular interchanges in the whole Bible, perhaps in all literature. Peter eats a meal, with the others, that Jesus cooks and then Jesus turns to Peter. In full view of the others, Jesus confronts Peter as to where he now stands with his Lord. A confrontation full of compassion! No knife twisting, no soul searching, just words which effectively and amazingly dispel all of Peter's heartache. "When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" Peter, no longer, it is Simon the rock. But a rock is strong and dependable, and Peter had been anything but dependable. "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" (a reference to Peter's boast in the upper room where he stated that even if everybody else fled he never would). Simon wasn't boastful here, responding, ""Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Simon's way forward is set. Past baggage was not forgotten but disposed of. He was to

become the disciple Jesus knew he was always capable of. What Peter had come with, to the beach, would be used in a different way, used for the benefit of Simon's new ministry. The old ways and routines were gone. Future challenges, new ways beckoned. It was so remarkable that by way of forgiveness, Jesus gives Peter a job to do.

Tony Campolo, in his book, *Let me Tell you a Story (2000)*, quotes his son, Bart, who, as they were leaving after a day at Disneyland, California, says to his Dad: I want one more ride on Space Mountain." His Dad replied that they were out of tickets and time. Bart said: "Jesus wants me to go!" "Where did you get that idea from?" his Dad replied. "From you! Sunday, when you were preaching, you said that whenever we cry Jesus cries, you said that He feels everything we feel. Well, if that's true, then when I'm having a really happy time on the roller coaster, He's really enjoying Himself too. So I KNOW He wants me to have one more ride on Space Mountain!" Campolo was so convinced that God empathizes with us to experience all our emotions that he was speechless! God sent his Son into the world, Campolo claims, to feel the pain and sorrow of our lives so acutely, and relieve us of them so that He could be relieved of them. I believe this remarkable encounter between Jesus and Peter clearly shows this! Bart got another ride on Space Mountain. After that theological argument, poor Dad had no choice!

As true Christians, we need to be responsive to Jesus' instructions and open to new ways in his vital mission. At this point I say to myself: "hang on a moment. I have all this baggage with me. What do I do with this?" Then I think of Simon, on the beach, and answer: "God this is amazing, Jesus just wants me to be me, to fulfill, to the best of my ability, his mission for me". Guided by the Holy Spirit, the results can be miraculous because so often, miracles happen as God blesses the gifts and efforts of those who seemingly have nothing to offer. As Bishop Tom Wright highlights, we must always be ready to be surprised by God. The disciples WERE on that spring morning, on the beach. They were surprised by the catch of fish. They were surprised by Jesus, himself! And, Wright claims, they must have been surprised by themselves! Wright says that when God ceases to surprise us, that may be the moment we have ceased to do business with him.

God does amazing things through us and with us. He commissions us to keep our eyes open for new possibilities, to listen attentively and to offer ourselves. Peter's story is an incredible illustration of Jesus' absolute faithfulness even with those who are not faithful to him. Here is an awesome example of the grace of God at work and I use the word carefully. Peter's second chance isn't through an act of penitence or remorse but through the wonderful grace and love of Jesus himself. Can you imagine Peter looking Jesus in the eyes as they sat together on that beach sharing a meal, after denying three times that he even knew the man and then being told - feed my lambs, feed my sheep, follow me. Ask yourself: what do I bring with me to God? What do I do with it? What does God want me to do with it? Let me say this for all of us: thank God the tomb is still empty, thank God Jesus is standing on the beach calling us to meet him, asking us to work for him, ready to deal with our baggage, work through it, claim it and use it to move us along challenging new avenues for him. Just simply asking us to follow him. Like Simon, and through God's grace, we never know what miracles may happen.