



Lives of Joy in a Suffering World

by The Revd Philip Cochrane
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This has been a strange week for me personally, marked with grief and joy. I am sure you have had weeks like that. The Christian tradition offers practices to remain grounded whether things are going well or not.

Our Morning and Night Weekday Prayers encourage the practice of gratitude and this is a good lifetime daily habit that I know many in St Paul's are experts at. Henri Nouwen in his classic, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, says:

Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint.

I would add to this 'even with the deprivations of COVID-19!' At the prayer of Examen in our Compline service we ask for the Divine Light, so that we see things not just with our own light (perspective) and the practice of gratitude enlarges our perspective and our hearts.

Perspective and boundaries are important in the Christian life if we are to be 'rooted and grounded' in God in such a way that we are not overwhelmed by the suffering and injustices of the world. Yet, if we follow the pattern of Jesus – he withdrew to be by himself...and with God as well as engaging in compassionate service in the world. The literal meaning of compassion means entering into suffering (passion) and in Christ's life and the stories (parables) he told, we see a compassionate God. So, how are we to do the same? Nouwen again suggests a way in which we can be compassionate without being overwhelmed:

The more I think about the human suffering in our world and my desire to offer a healing response, the more I realize how crucial it is not to allow myself to become paralyzed by feelings of impotence and guilt. More important than ever is to be very faithful to my vocation to do well the few things I am called to do and hold on to the joy and peace they bring me. I must resist the temptation to let the forces of darkness pull me into despair and make me one more of their many victims. I have to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus and on those who followed him and trust that I will know.

This last line seemed great when considering Advent – fixing our eyes on Jesus. At Christmas, we see God's response to a suffering world by Jesus becoming flesh and blood and entering into the life of the earth. As we look forward to Christ coming again, we look forward to the new heaven and earth, when all suffering will cease. Until then, we seek to be faithful to our vocation to do those few things we are called to do well and hold on to the joy and peace they bring.

A blessed Advent,

~Philip