

Reflection March 20, 2022 Lent 3

Recently, after reading an online article, I found myself thoroughly annoyed. The writer has said something to the effect of, “I don’t need a sky daddy to run my life...” I mean, fine. Cool. (also) Good for you. Why should I be offended, or annoyed, or (gasp) triggered?

I think it is the mocking tone that gets me. The perceived moral and intellectual superiority required to make such a statement—the juvenile presumption that all of faith boils down to a “sky daddy” as a stabilising moralising character in an otherwise untenable life. The idea that all the world needs is more Western, rational materialism to make it make sense. Such a statement and the worldview that undergirds it greatly misunderstands the tradition I am a part of. It belies an understanding of the tradition that we are a part of by our baptism. That we hold to in our praying, in our walking and worship, and seeking and service. It rejects and dismisses the mystics, martyrs, saints, sinners, blessers and breakers of bread and those who hungrily bite into the banquet. Those who laboured to carry the good news to this present day, to this very moment in time and space. The women witnesses to the empty tomb, those who wept at the lynching of Jesus and watered the hard ground with their tears. It presumes wrong our Indigenous siblings who heard the gospel and said, “Yes, we know already the God of whom you speak, that Holy One is ancient and as near to us as to Israel.”

Of course, we know that today and throughout history, there have been craven, immoral, violent people who have cloaked themselves in faith to perpetuate appalling, grim, and ghastly offences worldwide. So, for some, who know nothing else of faithful people other than boorish bible-thumpers who use faithfulness as an axe and a cudgel; it might make a good bit of sense to not only mock faith, but ball it up and throw it in the bin for once and for all.

But the thread of the story of God’s people, the story and witness of our spiritual ancestors is not so easily broken. Those who dined with Jesus, those who met him by chance at a well, who grasped at the hem of his garment, those who have felt and feel now, his hand upon their wounds and their very life, well, they echo through time and space. And like all great storytellers, there is an element to their testimonies, to our witness that is beyond the rational. It is enduring, intangible and vast; it is also piercing and specific and embodied. It is the living word, the living water that quenches and animates dry bones.

A few days ago, I had coffee with a dear sister who lives out of town but was here for a conference. She also has her roots in the Caribbean. We spoke of many things, but the thing that energised my spirit the most was our talk of the Elders and the ancestors who guide us in our work, in our lives. The ones who taught us how to cook, whose ingenuity and tenacity and magic allowed us to taste home, long after the memory of the places we used to walk freely were forgotten. The ones who taught us how to listen well, never ashamed to assert our ideas, but always aware of our place within the constellation, paying respect to those before. We spoke lovingly and gratefully, my sister and I, about those who trained us up in the maxims and proverbs that shape our culture and aid in our ability to walk well and resist assimilation. And so, it was there, in the lobby of Hotel Arts, that we connected the dots, no, picked up the breadcrumbs left for us to create, for us, a loaf of blessed nourishment. The crumbs bequeathed by those before us. Subtle parables reaching through the continuum, reminding us that we are storytelling women. Our teaching and activism and loving and mending and service are in our stories. Storytelling is our gift from folks who walked long ago, who recognised in Jesus, one of our own. Subversive, revolutionary, deeply powerful, and yet the slaughtered lamb of history. A guy, a teacher, who’ll tell a story, a weird story about a tree, and he’ll tell it just like an old, coffee-coloured grandmother. One with

diamonds shining in her coal-black eyes and warmth exuding from her calloused, worker's hands. She a seamstress, he a carpenter. Hands that match, both speaking in a kind of holy tongues that defy time. Both hoping that the listener is open enough, wise enough, humble enough to get the point of a strange and ancient parable about a tree...or a coin, or a wayward relative. But in this case a tree. Her voice musical, primordial, filled with both sunshine and aches, dances its way into the ear and caresses something otherwise untouchable inside. Even without knowing exactly what she means, the smallest, most innocent child rejoices in the hearing and in the being near to her radiance.

There is a frequency, friends, to a true thing. Yes, even children, especially children recognise it. But children grow up. Some without hearing a true thing ever, even in the church. And some of us grow up to say hard-headed things like "we don't need a sky-daddy to order our steps."

I am a human being, and so, a sinner. Now don't get your back up over that word. It is Lent, after all, and we must accept it. The word "sin", as it appears in the Bible, comes from the Greek word Hamartia or the Hebrew word Hata, both of which mean "to miss the mark" or "flawed". The word was used in archery and spear throwing. When a person missed the centre of the target, they erred, or "hamartia-ed". To be a sinner simply means we are human and so we miss the mark again and again. That doesn't make us shameful, or not enough, it makes us human. And it makes us incredibly prone to needing grace that we can never earn.

Anyways, I am a human who is called to ministry and to discipleship and teaching, which means that I must try to not just roll my eyes at the children who grow up to say things like "sky-daddy". By my estimation, I must examine my annoyance, probe the trigger and ask questions that will allow me to stand here, in front of you to teach about Majesty, Mercy, and Mystery—the holy trinity. What is God saying through my experience and my reading of scripture that is for the people on this day?

I sat for a good long while as I wrote this to ponder that. I thought that perhaps there might be some profundity revealed, something that would have the frequency of my coffee grandmother with diamond eyes. Something resonant to open ears and hearts and minds to the eternal goodness of God. For me, there were no triumphal horns or shaking ground. Not today. There was only a quiet invitation to pick up stray breadcrumbs and try to make a mouthful to share with you. An invitation to understand the pain and hurt behind words meant to infantilise and dismiss the faithful as an ignorant monolith.

I remembered that not so long ago, my heart had grown hard and devoid not only of faith but of curiosity. I was educated but dull. I argued as only an arrogant undergrad with a little bit of knowledge and no good sense can. I railed against my Christian classmates, belittling them, resenting them. The circumstances of my life up until that point had rendered me a barren, bitter tree. Broken at the root, wounded deeply by rot. I'd long before ceased to call out to God and nearly died of thirst holding on to my hubris. Most definitely, I was a tree bearing no fruit.

Now, Luke's gospel understands trees in a particular way. "In line with Luke's understanding of how trees' fruit reflect their nature, the barrenness of the fig tree in Luke 13 is evidence that it is already ruined. The owner (kurios, verse 8) tells the gardener to cut the tree down. The gardener advocates for tending the tree for one more year to determine whether it should be cut down. He proposes more advanced agriculture techniques but concedes to the owner that if the tree does not produce within a year, he will cut it down. Should the tree not produce within the year, its removal will not be a surprise. It will not catch the gardener unprepared. At that point, it would not have produced anything for four years, and it is literally wasting the earth (gē)."

And this, Church, is where it is of particular importance that we read well and listen well. For if we do, we will recall that Jesus is no “sky-daddy”. Jesus is a gardener. Jesus is the gardener.

In a few weeks from now, we will hear the Gospel of John account of the resurrection. We will rejoice in its hope and significance for our future. But curious in its telling, is that Mary Magdalene doesn't, at first, recognise Jesus, but mistakes him for a gardener. If we had kept reading from Isaiah 55 today, just a few more verses (verse 13), we'd have heard, “Where once there were thorns, cypress trees will grow. Where nettles grew, myrtles will sprout up. These events will bring great honour to God's name; they will be an everlasting sign of the Holy One's power and love.” God, likes to garden.

And so, Jesus, a gardener, much like a storyteller, plants seeds so they may grow up to bear foliage and fruit. The soil must be fertile, as must be the mind to truly apprehend the deep reservoir of nourishment. It cannot be forced; but can be repeated and allowed time to root, so sink in, and change.

Recently, I have been enjoying a song called, “The Cross Made the Change”. It's a wonderful song. In it, there is a couplet I find particularly stirring. “Now when we see Jesus, we become like Jesus. When we know how he sees us, we will never be the same.” Church, it is not only in gazing upon, and contemplation of a God whose ways are higher than our ways and whose thoughts higher than our thoughts. That is the Majesty, yes., and worthy of praise. And it is not just the loving breath of inspiration that guides us to see ourselves within the constellation and marvel at the whole. That is the Mystery and she is achingly beautiful to behold even in a Hotel Lobby, and she rightly makes us fall to our knees in gratitude. But there is also the Mercy. And Mercy is a gardener who changes us when we see him. And changes us again, even more deeply when we realise he sees us as beloveds worth another chance. By putting his hands into our soil, we are made different, we bear fruit. Only Mercy can see a barren, bitter tree, wounded by rot, and advocate for it to be offered more nourishment, more love, more time to grow before it is deemed worthless. Being seen for more than what appears to be a waste of earth is a profound grace that does shake the ground in me. That kind of Mercy changes everything—it reorders the cosmos. It can even change a sinner like me into a tree that bears fruit. Into a teacher that breaks and blesses a mouthful of bread from gathered crumbs left by beloved Elders. What I extract from this realisation, this story, is that I don't need a sky-daddy either. That is a misrepresentation of who God is. What I need is an enfleshed gardener, willing to give me another chance, another year to bear fruit. Willing to see I am not a waste of earth, but a blessing to it that could only bloom with Love.

May Mercy himself place his hand in yours on this day and satisfy you with peace beyond all understanding. May he water your garden abundantly drawing nearer to you than your own breath. That is one of the myriad ways the cross makes the change. May it be so. Amen.