

BLESSED WITH HUNGER

Philip Pinto, cfc

THE BBC Discovery programme, *Nature's Great Events: The Great Salmon Run*, told the story of the Pacific salmon which journeyed from their birthplaces in small freshwater streams out to the depths of the Pacific Ocean, and then returned, against all odds, to the very same stream where they were born, in order to lay their eggs. Only *one in two thousand* salmon make it back to do their spawning successfully. Immediately after they lay their eggs, they die. Talk about having a purpose! The salmon are very clear.

What strikes is that the salmon lived most of their lives in the sea, and then at some point, they follow an inner guide toward their original birthplace. They are each headed toward their inevitable death. If they are one of the lucky in each two thousand, they will actually reach their destination and reproduce. But the vast majority become food for bears, wolves, birds, bugs, worms, and other forest animals. This doesn't stop them from using all of their remaining life force and energy to struggle upstream toward their destiny, facing infinite challenges along the way.

*And I am ready like the young salmon
To leave his river, blessed with hunger;
For a great journey on the drawing tide.¹*

It is only when we sit down to contemplate all the ways in which we are lost, all the ways in which we have put ourselves in exile, all the ways we feel disconnected from our world – only then can we reconnect with it. Only then can we be carried out on the current of the true journey of our lives, the journey that would also bring us home. And so, during this session, I want to share some thoughts on going on the journey we have to go, in order to become the sort of people we were meant to become. This often involves living on the edge.

"If you are not living on the edge, you may be occupying too much space...."

Morgan Friedman

"There's no sense in going further - it's the edge of cultivation,"
So they said, and I believed it - broke my land and sowed my crop -
Built my barns and strung my fences in the little border station
Tucked away below the foothills where the trails run out and stop.

Till a voice, as bad as Conscience, rang interminable changes
On one everlasting Whisper day and night repeated - so: "*Something hidden. Go
and find it. Go and look behind the Ranges - Something lost behind the Ranges. Lost
and waiting for you. Go!*"²

It's scary and breathtaking living at the edge
of our lives
just us, the edge and the vast unknown
and echoing down the valley of our hearts
the constant call to trust.

¹ David Whyte, *Song for the Salmon*

² Rudyard Kipling, *The Explorer*

Yet how quickly that edge becomes a settled place
without an echo
a niche to line and realign till we feel satisfied
lulled into complacency by the now safe edge
our satisfaction undermined by a new awareness
calling us from beyond the edge of who we have become.³

Being at the edge is being on the verge of something happening, a birth... or a death, or it might be a birth and a death. The edge can be a scary place.

You have to go to the places that scare you so that you can see: What do you really believe? Who are you really? Are you prepared to take this all the way to wherever the truth leads you and accept that you have to figure out different ways of confronting reality?

If you want to have a life that is worth living, a life that expresses your deepest feelings and emotions, and cares and dreams, you have to fight for it. You have to go wherever you need to go, and you have to be wherever you need to be, and place yourself there against the forces that would distort you and destroy you.⁴

Recently I saw a film, PK, the initials actually form a Hindi word which means “drunk” or “inebriated”. It tells the story of an alien who lands on earth and how he gets on. Within a few hours of his landing he has the amulet he wears (which serves as the remote control to recall his space ship) stolen. The rest of the film deals with his attempts to get it back. Everywhere he goes, he is told that only God can help him. The film then shows his attempts to win the favour of the numerous deities that make up the many religions of India. Lost and confused, he is befriended by a woman journalist who eventually helps him track down the amulet. In a television debate with a ‘God Man’, a guru, he says:

Which God do I trust? You say God is one. I say that is wrong. There are two Gods: One God who created us, and the other that you created. I don't know anything about the one who created us. But the one you created is exactly like you: small, a liar, corrupt, one who meets the rich quickly and causes the poor to wait in long queues. He gets happy when he is appreciated and frightens people over small things. I have a simple point: trust the God who created us. And strike out the fake God you created.

We know how to protect our God.

You will protect your God? You ... our planet is a small one; there are millions of bigger planets out there in space. And you are sitting in this small planet, in a small city, in a small room, talking about protecting God. The one who created all this? He doesn't need your protection. He can protect himself real good.

Today somebody tried to protect their God and my friend died. Only this shoe is left. Stop protecting your gods or else in this planet, only shoes will be left, no humans.

Vincent Van Gogh once said, “To believe in God for me is to feel that there is a God, not a dead one, or a stuffed one, but a living one... when I have a terrible need of – shall I say the word – religion, then I go out and paint the stars.”

So, why am I saying all this, what I am inviting you to? I am asking that you have the courage to listen to a God who is speaking to us from the midst of life today, urging us to lay aside our old

³ Noel Davis, *At the Edge*

⁴ Alice Walker

ways of thinking, to trust the Word that is being spoken in the midst of life, to see a new world unfolding and to open our hearts and minds to this message.

The East German dissident Rudolf Bahro wrote, *"When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure."*

The Church needs a conversion without precedent, a 'new heart' that will generate faith in Jesus Christ in a new way in our modern society. We are asked to advance over the coming years to a new level of Christian life.

"Once the soul awakens,
the search begins
and you can never go back.
From then on,
you are inflamed
with a special longing
that will never again
let you linger
in the lowlands of complacency and
partial fulfilment.
The eternal makes you urgent.
You are loath to let compromise
or the threat of danger
hold you back from striving
toward the summit of fulfilment."⁵

The Religion Scholar, Phyllis Tickle, in her book *Emergence Christianity* writes that apparently every five hundred years or so, the Judeo-Christian tradition goes through a giant rummage sale during which it decides what must go and what must stay, what is dispensable and what is irreplaceable. She speaks about the Council of Chalcedon which marked down definite lines in our dogma and squashed debate. Then came the great Schism of 1054, followed by the Reformation of 1517 and now we are living in this emergent age. As Robin Meyers says, *"We are sorting through our theological stuff and asking painful and disorienting questions about where it came from, what it's worth, and why the once lucrative market for creeds and doctrines seems both depressed and depressing."*⁶

*Ours is a time when polarization, suspicion, denouncement, investigation, silencing, alienation, anger, cynicism and sadness divide our Church, and when our countries are rocked with economic meltdown precipitated by years of wrong-doing and greed, our earth menaced with global warming and ecological distress that threaten all planetary life with eventual extinction, the religions of the world plagued with extremism and age-old distrust that fuel war and terrorism, the people of the world abused with violence, slavery, and deprivation too great to measure. We are encumbered by old assumptions, burdened by memories that limit our horizons, and, therefore, unfree to see God coming to us from the future.*⁷

The Church has always been in trouble in some fashion or another, from its beginning 2000 years ago, and in some fashion or another, it always will be in trouble. But we could also point out that the Church has been in trouble, especially since it became the establishment religion of

⁵ John O'Donoghue

⁶ Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church*

⁷ Constance Fitzgerald, *From Impasse to Prophetic Hope*

the Roman Empire in the 4th century. At that time Church leaders adapted the structures of Roman governance, and bishops donned the vestments that copied the dress of Roman Senators. Popes established papal courts, and thought and behaved like monarchs, and even emperors. And yet, the troubles we are facing today aren't the worst troubles the Church has encountered. We need but think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the staggering corruption of the Renaissance papacies, and other examples of a Church in need of reform and renewal.

The first time the Church found itself in major public discredit, the reformers of the 16th century were crying out for serious review of both the theology and practices of the Church. They railed against clericalism, the wealth of the Church, the use of arcane language that distanced the laity from its inner operations and made them second-class citizens, the sale of relics, the conferral of indulgences in exchange for alms, and a theology that left laypeople to be docile and unthinking consumers of a faith long bereft of either witness or spiritual energy.

The answer of the Church to these concerns at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) was 150 anathemas at the very thought of change.

In the '60s something was released which, like toothpaste, could not be pushed back into the tube.

There was an energy, a sense of being alive, a spirit of adventure and newness which was exhilarating.

But somehow along the way, fear crept in. People found it hard to let go of the certainties of the past and to live with ambiguity.

And then we woke up to despair and death and loneliness. No energy, no life, no adventure. Doomed to loveless, barren living.

We are the dinosaurs waiting to die, because our world has changed, utterly changed.

So we have the silent majority who have adopted the Gods of the Empire, and have adjusted themselves to consumerism, comfort and neo-liberalism.

Those who wish to revive the past and have things as they were, to frantically try to shore up the foundations of the old thing – but cannot. Too much has happened and the Empire won't allow it.

Those who tweak the ancient model to a new system, and struggle to enforce it. Today's Vatican, and many more conservative religious congregations fall into this category.

Finally, those learning to read with new eyes the new situation they are living in. *“What does God want to teach us through this situation of chaos? What is the new thing that is trying to emerge from deep within us and from deep within the collective soul of Christianity?”*

We are experiencing death. We are being asked not to flee in the face of the death of Christianity, as we have known it. It is not just women who are being asked to be strong. It is that feminine depth of faithfulness in us all that is being asked to be true. (The women do not flee from the foot of the Cross).

Much of what is happening within the four walls of our household – liturgically, theologically, spiritually – is irrelevant to the great journey of the earth today and of humanity's most pressing struggles.

In a wonderful little book, the writer Philip Newell speaks about re-birthing God today. He writes:

The Beloved Disciple leans against the breast of the Lord. By doing this he heard the heartbeat of God. He became a symbol of the practice of listening – listening deep within ourselves, within one another, and within the body of the earth for the beat of Sacred Presence.

Do we know that within us is the unspeakable beautiful beat of the Sacred? Do we know that growing in awareness that we are bearers of Presence, along with a faithful commitment to honour that Presence in one another and in the earth, holds the key to transformation in our world?

Julian of Norwich said most simply, but most radically, that we are not just made by God, we are made of God. And Meister Eckhart added that we are God's seed, and God's seed must grow into God! We are born from the very womb of the Divine. Therefore, deep within us, God's wisdom shines eclipsing the ignorance of what we have done. Deep within us the creativity of God is at work negating our own barrenness and sterility. Within us – as sheer gift of God – is the capacity to bring forth what has never been before. Above all else, the love-longings of God are at the heart of our being. We may live in tragic exile from these longings, or we may have spent a whole life-time not knowing how to truly satisfy them, but they are there at the heart of our being, waiting to be born fresh.

How do we make real this presence at the core of our being? This is one of the things that Jesus wanted to teach us. (*Luke 10:22 ff.*)

Imagine an expedition, in the middle of the rainforest, whose members have lost their way. Some of them are suffering from malaria, rations are running out. Stranded and starving, somebody has to get packed up and sent off into the unknown to search for food, taking what water is left, hacking a way through the undergrowth, hoping somehow to forge a path to something somewhere. But then comes the noise of a helicopter, and rescue is approaching. That changes everything. The one thing needed now is some space, so that what is coming can land.

This is how the mystics saw leadership. For them, God is an approaching God, and our main job as leaders is not to construct but to receive; the key word is not so much 'achievement' but 'space' – the creating of opportunities where God might be received.

The Gospel of Jesus is worth staking one's whole life on. We become as big or as small as the objects of our love.

The Beloved sometimes wants
To do us a great favour:
Hold us upside down
And shake all the nonsense out.
But when we hear
He is in such a "playful drunken mood"
Most everyone I know
Quickly packs their bags and hightails it
Out of town.⁸

⁸ Hafiz, *Tired of Speaking Sweetly*

We do not risk anything at all. So, we still want the comfort of this life and it feels like a bigger risk to step out and say, “No,” or to say, “You can’t do that to me.” It feels like a larger risk, because I think the real prison we’re in is our affluence, and our focus on our affluence or our hypnosis around material goods. I offer you this to think about: what is it that keeps you from acting fearlessly?

We religious sisters and brothers need to fear and fight against a cheap god, a god of the imagination and of human dreams, a god who is an idol rather than a reality, a god who blesses our mediocrity and weakness rather than calling us to growth. We need to seek the real God, the flame of love that burns and quenches the deepest yearnings of our wounded hearts.⁹

On the whole, we don’t take Jesus seriously – whether we call ourselves Christians or not. There are some remarkable exceptions. But by and large we don’t love our enemies, we don’t turn the other cheek, we don’t forgive seventy times seven times, we don’t bless those who curse us, we don’t share what we have with the poor, and we don’t put all our hope and trust in God. We have our excuses. I am no saint. It is not meant for everybody, surely? It’s a great ideal, but it’s not very practical in this day and age.

1. We don’t do the inner work.
2. We do not keep up to date with reading – not piety and devotion, but real deep reflection on what is happening in our lives, our struggles.
3. We are not committed to living healthily: healthy people in a healthy relationship with a healthy God!
4. We do not take the necessary steps: spiritual direction, counselling, spiritual reading, wholesome community prayer – not firing psalms at one another.

My proposal will be that we learn to take Jesus seriously, and that it is precisely in this day and age that we need to do so. In fact, what we also need to take seriously is this day and age, our times. We too often live in a kind of dream world that does not take the threats and challenges of today seriously enough. There are Christians who think that one can take Jesus seriously without taking too much notice of what is happening in the world around us. Jesus’ spirituality was thoroughly contextual. He read the signs of his times and taught his followers to do the same. We take Jesus seriously when, among other things, we begin to read the signs of our times with honesty and sincerity.¹⁰

We are called to be fearless – particularly when we gather in Chapter. The mystic Rumi says:
*Fear is the cheapest room in the house
I would like to see you living in better conditions!*

Margaret Wheatley writes that some of the best teachers she knows about fearlessness have been young people she has met who have shared their stories with her. One can call them ‘walk-outs’.

They walk out of careers and work that prevent them from contributing as much as they can. They walk out of relationships when they don’t feel themselves respected. They walk out of ideas that are limiting. They walk out of institutions that make them feel small and worthless.

But, she adds, they don’t walk out to disappear. They walk out to walk on.

⁹ Iain Mathews, *The Impact of God*

¹⁰ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today*

They walk on to places where they can make a contribution. They walk on to relationships where they are respected. They walk on to ideas that call on their strengths. They walk on to work where they can discover and use their potential.

What do we need to walk out of?

What do we need to walk in to, in order to realise our giftedness and our potential?

Risky business
this surfing on grace
I do not know if I will be carried
on a powerful swell
or too conscious of self
will lose myself in the wake.
What I do know
is that even though swept under
I will emerge
perhaps bruised and breathless
to find grace afloat
ready again to carry me safely home.¹¹

¹¹ Jean Meier CSJ