

Talk given by Lyn Hutchinson, Dove Meeting, 10 September 2011

A Big Picture God and a Small Picture Journey

As I was pondering how to shape this talk around the story of my faith journey and the theme for Dove in 2011 : “*Freely you have received, freely give*”, I remembered the first time as a very new Christian hearing a word given in Church that was for me, to do with a move my husband had been offered in his work, and consequently for us as a family, and the reluctance I felt – it was something about being transplanted, not as a weed to be thrown away and burned, but as a much-loved tree is transplanted and goes on to grow good stuff, and the end was “*You have been given good things in this life and others must expect to share your fruit*” ... freely you received, freely give.

I grew up in rural Tasmania, the eldest of three daughters. My parents and grandparents were farmers. My parents and sisters still live in Tasmania; they are all wonderful growers of things; a testament to those agricultural roots. I don't share this growing gift – the agricultural gene must have been mutant in my person!

My sister told me recently that I always seemed unhappy as a little girl; I think I was from a young age always looking for approval; affirmation that I was OK – and never seeming to find that “OKness”.

I always loved Church. We were Presbyterian; my mum was always involved, and also dad in later years. Although I had some wonderful influences in my childhood, particularly a school teacher who knew how to love me, took me to camps, visited me later when I went to boarding school and nursing training, introducing me to church families and showing me care and love, it never quite reached the deep places where I was very unsure, and ... just not OK. I think I involved myself in Church life, trying to find more.

Eventually I moved away and came to New Zealand, and found a different life; a small window of a life I was enjoying. I met my first husband, who died after we'd been married three years, whilst we were living back in Australia. I returned to NZ with our two-year-old son. For about three years I lived a pretty loose kind of life, until I had a big wake-up call and found my way back to God, for fear of dying without making my life “right with Him”, as I saw it at the time.

By now I had remarried, had another son, and was managing my life. I had wide Church experiences; some were helpful, some were not. Whether in my life before embracing my faith, and after, I still tried to manage the bit that was never good enough. Always striving and never making it.

I lived in Sydney during the mid-80's to mid-90's, and there I had a job that was life changing. I worked as a Principal's P.A in a school. It was there I found I loved being with people; getting alongside them. The Principal ended up getting me more admin support so I could spend more time with parents, kids and staff, where my role had gravitated, away from my very mediocre admin skills.

On my return to NZ, I slumped into a pretty low place, during which I realised I had been given work that helped me discover a gift, but allowing that gift to become my identity – at last I was affirmed, admired, and it felt so good! I assumed that would continue when I returned here. It did not. I'd tried to find more work in a similar field; nothing gave me that deep satisfaction. One day I begged God to show me what was going on –

anything, just a clue. The verse in John 12:24 came to me, about the kernel of wheat that must go into the ground and die if it is to bring forth new life. It wasn't the answer I was seeking, but it was something, a clue. I see more clearly now. It's about giving up what I want, and who I am, and allowing God to take it and make it a whole bunch of wheat. Over time I had more clues, which eventually lead me into doing some training, to do a job that I now find deeply satisfying.

As I was preparing what to say for this talk, I woke one morning with the thought "*I can't do this! How can I put myself before you, to give a talk when my life has so little measurable outcomes of my faith journey that I can inspire anyone with?*" Take healing, for instance. Last year our family was given a great gift where my husband, through a random procedure, was diagnosed with cancer, but the treatment of the initial medical problem, actually removed the cancer, which, if it were not for the relatively minor problem, we would never have known existed, until it was much more complex and difficult to treat. At that time I truly felt God had his big arms around us and gave us a marvelous outcome.

This is not always the case and only God knows the whys and wherefores of these situations. But this day I was struggling with pain – I am often challenged by the pain of degenerative arthritis and get very frustrated at the limitations this puts on my life, but managed well, it's OK. However that managing is very frustrating at times. This day was my day off so I turned on the TV and there was a guy saying stuff that got my attention. He spoke words from John 7:33 : "*Blessed are you who does not fall because of me*" or "you are blessed if you do not fall away because of the struggles you experience in your life. Jesus gave, and gives miracles to demonstrate His power on earth; can you hold on and trust His plan to manage your life, and not be offended by the subtlety of the way God works? We ask – 'Give me this day our daily bread – then He gives us ways to find our bread ... a job, a gift, a medical intervention, a kindness that lifts the weight of a busy day – whatever bread we may need. Don't be offended then, at His ways, when they may not be mine! Isaiah 55:8-9 reminds us, "This plan of mine is not what you would work out, neither are my thoughts the same as yours? For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than yours, and My thoughts than yours."

The speaker went on to say, "The day will come when we will be fully restored, and scripture gives us lots of pictures of that – like the lion and the lamb in Isaiah 11, but for now we only gave glimpses of that restoration.

I miss much, I believe, by looking ahead for the great working of God, and often miss what He gives me right now. I do like fancy, pretty, complete ... I like outcomes that are tidy and measurable; I have an expectation of how things ought to be, and one day this thinking was seriously challenged! I had been hurt by a careless remark. It doesn't take a whole lot to throw my sensitive soul out of kilter – and the belief that I notice is a fairly dominant one in my family that the packaging is very important – "look the part", "first impressions count" etc, so when an unfavourable comment about my person left me unhinged, my old wounds kicked into gear rapidly.

A few mornings later, I was out walking, still stinging, when I saw an elderly man who used to walk my way on his walking frame, and used to mimic my walk – it was our regular joke. This day, however, he stopped right in my face and looked at me. I can't vouch for his 20:20 vision but that's irrelevant. He said, "You are beautiful to look at". I did not dismiss him, or laugh, as would be a normal response. Somewhere very deep inside, something happened. The child who longed to be affirmed broke.

After I recovered my composure – after the river of tears came the thought ... “*You look here and there to be affirmed, to this one and that, those you put on pedestals, those you adjust your behaviours to impress and gain favour ... are you willing to accept those I choose to affirm you? Are you willing to accept who I say you are? Can that be enough?*”

I always carried the belief unaware for a long time, then aware, and acknowledged, but hidden in humour, to excuse my poor sense of self – that if I were God, I would have made a much more impressive me. A me that would be noticed and applauded for all my clever feats. Instead, my journey teaches me that who I am is who I need to be ... so how about just get on with it!

I learned two significant keys to help me “get this”:

1) The Imago Dei – God’s image in whom I am made. It is who He needs me to be, to represent the tiny fragment of His marvelousness in my spot in the world He has placed me in today.

2) The word **Hamartia** is an archery term the early New Testament Church used for Sin. When I try to be who I am not – to be more or less – I sin. In her book ALL THE WAY TO HEAVEN, Elizabeth Sherrill puts it this way: “The New Testament word for sin is Hamartia, an archers term for *missing the mark*. Not the commission or omission of particular deeds, but being off-target. Failing to do God’s specific task for me alone at a given moment. Failing to be ME ... no matter how praiseworthy an action, if it wasn’t in His design for me, I’ve “*missed the mark*”.

St Francis wrote “*Holiness is not a personal achievement; it is an emptiness you discover in yourself. Instead of resenting it you accept it, and it becomes the free space where the Lord can create anew.*” Kind of like the grain of wheat buried in the ground.

This makes great sense to me. I sin when I miss the mark of being who I truly am – when, out of fear or envy or position seeking, I sin. I am not OK with who I am, so I build a better model – I lose sight of God.

When Jesus said in Matthew 5:3 “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*”, He says to me, when you look at who you really are – take away the showy bits that are not real, it boils down to something pretty small – scarily small ... can I trust God with something so vulnerable? But if it is real, it’s precious, like a pearl – a metaphor for something beautiful that comes about when the oyster grapples with the irritant of a grain of sand. If our lives are to bring beauty, or relief, or kindness or gentleness to another, we have to just look at who God has made us to be. We are as we are, to be a blessing to another. This is demonstrated in a modern take on the Beatitudes:

BEATITUDES FOR OUR TIME

Blessed are you,

When you remain available, sharing in simplicity what you possess.

Blessed are you,

When you weep over the absence of happiness around you and throughout the world.

Blessed are you,

When you opt for gentleness and dialogue even when this seems long and difficult.

Blessed are you,

When you creatively devise new ways of donating your time, your tenderness and gems of hope.

Blessed are you,

When you listen with your heart to detect what is gift in others.

Blessed are you,

When you strive to take the first step, the necessary one to attain peace with brothers and sisters throughout the world.

Blessed are you,

When you keep in your heart wonderment, openness and a free questioning of life.

Blessed are you,

When you take seriously your faith in the Risen Jesus.

(Louise-Helene Renou, Quebec)

A further small 'metaphor' comes from the story of the loaves and fishes in John 6:2-12. (Lyn read this).

I was driving home from a spectacularly challenging day at work, saying to God ... "Well, what was all that about? What is the point?" So ineffective did I feel... The whole loaves and fishes thing came to mind. The little kid had his lunch, no doubt very surprised when the disciples asked him to donate it ... I can imagine him looking at his five buns and couple of fish, then to the crowd, and as we may flippantly say today ,,,"Well, good luck with that!" But to me it means you give what you have; give it freely and let God do the dinner! Let Him meet the needs as only He can. But He asks us to partner with the work. And we may be astonished when occasionally we get to see what He does – like that little kid, but often times He asks us to give and to trust, which at times feels impossible; the smallness of what we can do in a situation that seems so huge. Jesus reminds us that He does not ask us to do more than we are equipped to do, but despite how we feel, give what we have in our hands and He will do what in our human limitations, we can't. Kind of like the Serenity Prayer:

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference!"

Faith is a bit like being partially sighted; we can see bits, shadows, but the whole picture we only have in faith. 1 Corinthians 13:12 says: "*We can see and understand only a little about God now, as if we were peering at His reflection in a poor mirror, but some day we are going to see Him in His completeness, face to face. Now all that I know is hazy and blurred, but THEN I will see everything clearly, as God sees into my heart right now*".

I wonder if there are fuzzy clues all around us that we dismiss. Phillip Yancey writes about this in his book *Rumours of Another World* ... "Astonishingly, the Creator seldom imposes himself on his creatures. It requires attention and effort on our part to 'remember our creator', because the creator slips quietly backstage. God does not force his presence on us. When lesser Gods attract, God withdraws, honouring our fatal freedom to ignore him." He goes on to say, "in a metaphor, creation retains the "smell" of God as wineskin retains the smell of wine. Skeptical, unseeing people can even deny that God exists. Believers have the task of releasing the holy sparks. We do so through

a process of hallowing, and all of us have a part to play in this process. Hallowing is a deliberate ongoing process I do not gain a new set of supernatural eyes that enable me suddenly to see the world with perfect vision. Every day, every hour, every moment, I must exercise my calling to hallow God's creation. Holy sparks are potentially trapped in every moment of my day, and as God's agent I am called to release them."

My experience of this faith journey has never been simple or clear-cut. It's been very stumbly, so I like these biblical metaphors – hazy mirrors, a little boy's lunch, a grain of wheat hidden in the ground, etc...

My Protestant upbringing gave me much – a love of the Word of God and a hunger to search for more. It was this hunger that led me on this journey toward my conversion to Catholicism. Much of my reading and learning was of Catholic teachers and writers, and Dove's embracing acceptance of me at my first experience at Camp in 2001, when I disclosed to my roomies that I was Protestant – and they went out of their way to love me with enormous grace.

I decided to explore via RCIA, to learn more and maybe put this "thing" to bed and dig in and be a settled Protestant once I learned the things that my parents and a few others saw as insurmountable differences. So in 2007/8 I did RCIA, and I turned over every stone that seemed to hide a question or a difference, a lot of which former Presbyterian theologian Scott Hahn explores in his book – Rome Sweet Home, and I fell in love with a faith expression that fits me. I found the right shape hole to fit this shaped peg. For me, I have chosen Catholicism as my best framework in which my faith can be expressed as authentically as I can, and I feel indeed blessed for having been given the tools, support, kindness and patience by those who journeyed with me. And of my former Pastor, who heard me with understanding of my need to do this exploring, and accepted my decision with great grace. Sr. Mary Maitland helped me grapple with the big questions and explained to me the bigness of our faith expression, the continuum is very wide, and we can find our place to fit, that others may find themselves on any part of this continuum, and we are all where we need to be to express our spirituality according to the way we have been wired by God. This for me has been a magnificently freeing time of learning and growing. It's been humbling and challenging, but also deeply satisfying... a 'homecoming'.

I see life overall as God's huge picture. He sees the end and the beginning and all the bits in the middle. He has shaped us all to have just the right fitting part in this picture, kind of like a massive jigsaw. We see our bit, over time we find where it's to be placed; we get to rub shoulders with our neighbouring bits – but if we try to see the whole picture we might get very confused. God sees it in its entirety, like it says in Corinthians, and one day we shall see it all in its completeness, but for now we are to help one another so we do not become discouraged and overwhelmed.

Each morning His mercies are new; our challenge is to look for today's mercies, and to know that there will be more tomorrow.