

Honest Doubt- A way forward!

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 14 November, 2021

A Reflection by Kevin Dallas

Pentecost 25B

**1 Samuel 2:1-10 -*The Song of Hannah*; Mark 13: 1-8;
A Contemporary Response - from *Working Preacher***

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

I would like to reflect for a few moments on some recent events in the wider world of Christian leaders (some might be inclined to insert the word Celebrity) prompted by some observation made during lockdown. I must say I enjoy maintaining a lively interest in the broader spectrum of the life and times of Christian enquiry, and perhaps hopefully make a link or two with today's gospel reading

The last time I shared on zoom, I finished with a quote from the former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, taken from his reflections on Life and Death in his book "*Waiting for the Last Bus*". Now in his late 80's this distinguished churchman, through his many writings, has had a very public relinquishing of his life of belief. Quoting from the chapter entitled *Loosing It*:

That's why we should hold our values and moral norms with a sense of their provisional nature. We never know when we'll want to change them because we have been persuaded there is a better way to organise society.

Then using a lovely quote from a poem by Louis MacNeice, he writes:

For every static world you or I impose upon the real one must crack at times and new patterns from disorder open like a rose. And old assumptions yield to new sensation.

He goes onto to say:

Revealed religions find this hard to deal with. Their authors have persuaded them that they are in possession of a divine instruction that, unlike everything else in human history, isn't subject to change and decay. It's a mountain not a river. It stays put and never moves.

We are now being challenged to find the new norm amidst this Post Pandemic age - a new way of being. It is interesting to ponder today's text (Mark 13: 1-8) dealing with Jesus prophecies concerning the destruction of the temple, and an end to what he saw as a corrupt religious system. A group of his disciples is immediately keen to learn when and how this will come about. The words found in Mark 13 go on to caution against being fooled when men claim to speak in his name, finally a warning of the apocalyptic age to come. An early example of change and decay within the established order.

The more I considered these few verses the more I became aware of the likelihood that an element of doubt might have been present, surely a natural human response when confronted with such claims. The disciple's possibly doubt Jesus prophecies concerning the temple, not just accepting at face value their questioning recorded claims, they want to know when, how and where. Jesus encourages the disciples to beware! To have a healthy doubt about anyone claiming to speak in his name. And finally I am sure they were in great doubt concerning the apocalyptic age arriving.

We know from history that there have been many points in time across the last 2000 years when, if not literally, then philosophically, the temple of religious understanding has been threatened with destruction - and sometimes physically destroyed brick by brick, or morphed into the 28,000 and counting formal expressions of Christianity that exist in the world today.

Perhaps we can relate the same change and decay and renewal to how our own temples of personal belief have ebbed and flowed, perhaps even crumbled and reformed, as that beautiful quote put it "*old assumptions yield to new sensations*". Many of us can look back over a significant lifetime and observe their dismantling and reforming, having recognised the provisional nature of our earlier convictions.

I am sure this has not been easy, and feelings of apprehension and fear have often surrounded such an experience. For many, leaving the faith communities of our earlier formative life can be traumatic. An end to life as it was known, perhaps we might say, "a mini apocalyptic episode".

Indeed it could be said of the current times, that never has the pace and speed of change been so great. The lifetime I have lived has contained changes that, in my father's day, would have taken several lifetimes.

Is it going too far to suggest that one of the many new "temples" emerging is on line: the World Wide Web? What would a First Century Christian make of that prediction? No less shattering than getting their heads around the destruction of the Temple and the apocalyptic passage?

Authentic, or honest, doubting is the story that makes Richard Holloway's writing so compelling for me, the brutal honesty as he wrestles with his doubts in such a public space. More about that in a moment.

In ancient times, and perhaps particularly then, the temple authorities, the religious elite, were keen to guard their take on Divine instruction as being the one true way, not subject to change or decay. And yet we know the temple was destroyed and their particular understanding was subject to revision.

As for Jesus' word, set down in verse 5 of the same chapter "*Beware that no one leads you astray*" or as the King James Version has it: "*Take heed lest any man deceive you*".

Sadly, it is disturbing to observe that, over the last few years a number of so called high profile Christian apologists - (some were lead Pastors in two of the largest mega churches in America) plus head of Hillsong New York, have all departed under a cloud, causing more than a few pillars of their particular "temple" to shake, tremble and possibly fall. Not for renouncing or doubting their faith like Holloway, but for failing to live up to their own inflexible certainty. Not honest doubt, but gross deceptions! And in most cases, severe lack of accountability.

Authentic doubt, coupled with keen discernment, requires constant vigilance, if we are to guard against being fooled.

To digress for a moment, I came across some interesting exceptions - and there appear to be an increasing number within evangelical circles - openly and very publically questioning their faith, much of it on the "Temple on Line!

Josh Harris, at age 21, authored a book which sold over 1 million copies called "*I kissed dating goodbye*". It became the touchstone of the so called purity movement, so prominent in the late 1990's, with thousands of young people being persuaded by its message of forgoing the secular dating scene and giving their love life over to God. And so called "Godly Elders" to hold them accountable. Josh went on to Co-Pastor one of the mega churches for over a decade.

In the last few years he has renounced that book and its contents, together with his own faith - only to transition into organising seminars focussed on the very same populations - helping them to deconstruct the legalism and purity culture he was so prominent in advocating. As one well credentialed critic has written (a Professor of History and Religious Studies) concerning this still-young man:

Harris may have glued a different label on the bottles of life's elixir that he is hawking, but he is still selling exactly the same product: Josh Harris.

This is consistent with the subculture of celebrity evangelicalism that nurtured him, that gave him a platform, and that he now claims to have repudiated. Light on intellectual substance and shamelessly appealing to the emotional intuitions and needs of the customer base, the evangelical celebrity world is geared toward marketing the attractive personality as the branded product that will solve the problems of potential customers.

It is how Josh Harris, the youthful peddler of purity, made his name and his money. And that is precisely how Josh Harris, the older and wiser former Christian, continues to sell himself to anyone foolish enough to buy his "making peace with your story".

Not a very gracious critique. And one I find unfair in its harsh tone. So he was young and a zealot for his faith. And more importantly culture! He was raised, discovered his charismatic personality and started to apply all those skills to what he understood at the time to be good and pure! What is more he was only too quickly given a not insubstantial platform.

His Life's lived experience came along and over the years he was able to stand back and reflect on his earlier naivety, desperate to correct the error of his ways and apologised for any hurt he had caused. He was not the first nor will he be the last to tread this path. Ultimately who is qualified to judge how honest doubts evolve?

On a personal level, I well remember in the 1990's coming across some insightful literature specifically on Spiritual Abuse, and having a "*well I think a might have been a victim*" moment of my questioning towards the faith and belief and teaching of my early years. This happened at a time when, as part of a Baptist home bible study group, we were coming to terms with the day to day struggles of a young gay Christian, able to witness the toll taken with his personal conflict, raising our awareness and considerable doubt towards the attitude of those wishing to reform him.

Damage continues to be done by those in religious circles, peddling the absolutes that only a harsh certainty seems to bring. I've a feeling it not only still exists, but as those involved claim victim status and feel even more under threat, the harsher and louder it gets. And now it is often to be found on the megaphone of the internet. One particularly strident voice I came across recently using the title "*The truth of it*" (which subtext can be read as the "*my truth to be found in Biblical texts as translated by me*")!!

Perhaps there needs to be some hospitality of heart and mind, not fearing the destruction of our temple of belief, but opening our mind to another way, receiving the guest of doubting with some amount of goodwill.

Returning to Richard Holloway and his most recent book "*Stories we tell ourselves*": unable to entirely tear up his ticket, he is still waiting for that bus! Happily it has not yet arrived. As he asserts:

There are two kinds of agnostics: those who say "I don't know and I don't care" and those who don't know, but still care and search. Holloway is in the second group. He doesn't know but he still searches. "There is more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me than in half the creeds." Holloway might go further than Tennyson and say "in any creed."

Pitt Streeters are no strangers to doubt. "*Whatever you believe whatever you do not believe!*" And many can attest to the growth to be found as honest doubt points the way forward.

So, finally, to acknowledge the historical figure of Lord Alfred Tennyson that great Victorian British Poet, whose quote from his huge tome Holloway uses In Memoriam:

The great themes of Loss, Change and Transcendence, which are the inspiration behind the great work and a direct reflection on Tennyson's life's experience, remembering the Victorian era saw enormous profound and might I say Apocalyptic challenges to the understanding of the trajectory of human existence which in turn shook the very foundations of the established religious order.

Just as I have briefly tried to draw a parallel between those ancient scripture texts found in Mark's gospel (taken seriously but not literally) and the lived experience of great men, ancient and contemporary, let's exercise some hospitality to the thought that to use the full line from Tennyson: *There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.*

As the line from Louis MacNeice goes:

*For every static world you or I impose upon the real one must crack at times
and new patterns from disorder open like a rose,
And old assumptions yield to new sensation.*

Less certainty and more Faith leading to a season of New Sensations!

May it be so.