

Reflection on the readings for the Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

The parable of the Ten Virgins or Bridesmaids appears only in Matthew's gospel. It is intended to exhort us to the consequences of being caught spiritually unprepared. The bridegroom represents Christ, who will return at an unknown time to carry those prepared into heaven. The wise virgins symbolise prepared Christians who are ready for the Lord's return. The foolish virgins represent those who are not obeying Jesus, and therefore are unprepared for the Lord's return. Jesus teaches that the wise are those who not only listen to His teachings, but actually follow those teachings and he defines a foolish person as one who hears but does not follow the Word of God. Foolishness is a matter of not having set and followed the right priorities. Wisdom is a matter of having the right priorities and pursuing them as the things that matter most to God and as the things that are most important and really last.

Accepting this then, the purpose of my reflection today is to delve somewhat deeper into those factors which may aid or hinder this journey. We know a lot more today about human sociology and psychology, we understand how our life experiences and emotions impact our best laid plans and even our sense of personal adequacy. One of the key challenges in discipleship, following Jesus, his teachings and commandments, is firstly getting to a position where we understand ourselves. I want to illustrate this point with two quick examples, one fictional and one real.

John Michael Green is a very popular American author of young adult fiction. His fourth novel titled "*The Fault in Our Stars*", made it to number one on The New York Times Best Seller list in January 2012, and has since been made into a movie. *The Fault in Our Stars* tells the story of Hazel Grace Lancaster, a 16 year old girl who has had cancer for three years, and Augustus 'Gus' Waters, a 17 year old boy who when he meets Hazel is in remission from cancer himself. The novel tells the story of these two young people searching for meaning in lives and both sadly destined for early deaths. We take up the story where Hazel and Gus meet

for the first time in a cancer survivors support group. Patrick the group leader says, “Augustus, perhaps you’d like to share your fears with the group.” “My fears?”... “Yes.” ...“I fear oblivion,” he said without a moment’s pause. “I fear it like the proverbial blind man who’s afraid of the dark.” Patrick seemed for a moment lost for words, (he replied to the group) “Would, uh, would anyone like to speak to that?” Hazel than speaks;... (her voice) “ I looked over at Augustus Waters, who looked back at me. You could almost see through his eyes they were so blue;

she says;

“There will come a time when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything. There will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that’s what everyone else does.”

Hazel and Augustus are dealing with serious illness at far too young an age, and strong emotions and searching for meaning in their own lives. Through our entering into their story, we the readers seek to understand the complexities and challenges of a fleeting existence, and in life’s purpose more generally, and ultimately the challenges of belief or its seeming absence. Throughout the novel there are many literary references. Fittingly one of which is directed to the work of an American literary giant, Emily Dickinson, and her poem. “*There’s a Certain Slant of Light*”. This poem was written in 1861 and like much of Dickinson's poetry I find it is not that easy to understand. The poem describes the way a shaft of winter sunlight prompts us to reflect on the nature of religion, death, and despair. Perhaps, the poem may suggest that such feelings are in fact part of a message from God, or perhaps they will not. Dickinson’s struggles with faith and doubt are well recorded. She made a deliberate decision not to participate in public religious life at an early age; however her poems and letters reveal a deep interest in issues of faith and doubt.

It strikes me, that in her own way, her life reflected a constant and enduring battle in the search for life's meaning. It is also apparent to me that if she was alive today and was questioned about her beliefs she would most likely say that she was "spiritual but not religious". This would be an unusual public sentiment in the nineteenth century, but a pretty standard response for our times. Research from the respected Pew Research Centre, in Washington D.C, reporting based on the American experience but not too far removed from that in Australia, tells us that over twenty seven percent of those surveyed gave a similar response when asked two separate questions: "Do you think of yourself as a religious person, or not?" and "Do you think of yourself as a spiritual person, or not?" For people like you and I, called to spread God's word, I prefer to see this as an opportunity rather than a problem. Many people struggle with faith, taking up the word 'spiritual' leaves the door open, it may well symbolise a hope or desire, a seeking that is not yet at the stage of dwelling. Emily Dickinson died in 1886 at the age of fifty five. She rejected the trappings of religion during her life, but I wonder if she really doubted God, and I surmise from her writings probably not, but even if the answer is yes than I think perhaps no more so than she seems to have doubted herself.

Doubt is a universal human experience, but doubt is not faith and faith is not doubt, I think in many cases doubt is but our nature trying, often as best it can, given our innate personalities and life experiences, to come to understanding of what our hearts would most probably already know if this was just more apparent to us. We have already discussed two examples of this, the first being our fictional young person's struggle for existential (*i.e us being existing at and in this time and place*) relevance and meaning, and the second, an educated and honest battle with the limitations of living in a natural world that allows only fleeting glimpses of the transcendental (*i.e. beyond or above the range of normal or physical human experience*) domain. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes this state well when he speaks of the contemporary boundaries that exist between our self-centred, individualistic selves and that porous existence that once accepted God, and an enchanted world, without any question. He tracks this as a gradual process of disenchantment, a loss of

a way that people used to experience the world, a diminishment of existence, and an impoverishment.

A growing proportion of people in the western world now live their lives as these “buffered” individuals. Western society has changed but at the same time it has yet to come to terms with filling the gaps that now exist through this impoverishment. This can be shown in the search for meaning, the “spiritual but not religious” movement, which I view as a desire for compensation for loss of meaning, a compensation for the existential fear and anxiety that our life has such a diminished meaning when the transcendent dimension is removed.

So then, looking at what we have spoken of already are we now in a position to turn again to our readings for this Sunday? Could we look at our fictional characters Hazel and Augustus and our famous poet Emily and answer the question; if we relate what we have heard of their lives thus far and see this as an analogy of those who are wise and those who are foolish, where do we think they would sit. I don’t know about you, but I would want to know a lot more about their lives and even than I think it would reinforce in my mind that these wise judgements are best left to the source of all wisdom.

I find the parable challenging, its setting is within the context of ‘end times’ which is of course fitting as we enter into the end times of liturgical year of Matthew. It is directed towards those who must be vigilant for imminent end of the age and coming of the son of man, (Jesus’s second coming, the son of man comes or the coming of the son of man is a phrase only used in one particular way all the way throughout the Gospels to mean the judgement of God on a nation) and this was to possibly occur in the disciples own life time. But here we are over two thousand years later and I cast my focus to the grace needed for this modern age and the very real complexities of life that people face today along with all our increased understanding of the human person, both our frailties and our strengths.

I have probably experienced enough of life now to realise that Hazel and Gus, and Emily are far from alone in their beliefs and feelings. Their

expressions of fear, anxiety, and even unexpressed inadequacies are common human behaviours. This of course colours our response to God's Word. In addition there is this overlay of complexity in responding or even being adequately aware of the systemic societal change and dealing with that sense of restlessness and the lack of purpose and/or lack of contentment that is present in so many people's lives today.

The problem is that we are human. We experience feelings we often find difficult to control, we carry experiences and weaknesses that have formed us since our childhoods, to be human is, in many ways, to be inadequate, both by definition and by nature. Only God is truly adequate, only God is the Source of true wisdom or all wisdom as shown in our first reading today. Can we perhaps now look at Matthews's parable and take some consolation from it that despite its eschatological setting (*i.e relating to death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind*) all ten bridesmaids both wise and foolish alike fell asleep waiting for the bridegroom. We try our best to borrow wisdom from God, but even those who are wise find it hard to stay awake all the time, perhaps no created being is that perfect.

You and I do have something very precious however; we have retained that sense of porousness between this natural world and that towards which we are all heading. This should be a both a great comfort and also a great challenge, comfort in that God can heal all our needs, and that we have a community to support us, and that we have gifts of grace, sacraments to sanctify us; and also a challenge to become today's missionaries in our everyday lives, to do what we can to instil that sense of enchantment within our families, our communities and in the lives of all peoples.

In all this May God give you Peace.

There's a certain Slant of light,

Winter Afternoons –

That oppresses, like the Heft

*Of Cathedral Tunes –
Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are –
None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the Seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –
When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –*

Emily Dickinson 1861