

God prepares the way

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Now is the time when we traditionally look back over the preceding year as we prepare for the annual meetings in the church and many of our community organisations. And it is a good exercise, particularly as we can often discover many blessings and achievements that we can overlook when we are caught up in the daily grind. In addition, preparing for my mother's funeral, with the writing of the eulogy and finding photos for the tribute, has caused me to look at the journey of my own life, particularly with the discovery of photos from my growing up. There is the opportunity to discern the hand of God on my journey to this place and this time. There is a great thing to see God in the good times, but also to bring an understanding of the support of our saviour in the hard times. This is why I so like the Footprints poem:

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord, many scenes from my life flashed across the sky. In each scene, I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints. Other times there was only one. This bothered me because I noticed during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow, or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints. So, I said to the Lord, "You promised me, Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I noticed that during the most trying periods of my life, there has only been one set of prints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?" The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

Now there is tremendous comfort in these words, but they also reflect a maturity of faith that looks at the world in the context of God. Rather than becoming self-obsessed, this way of looking is about introducing God into the process.

This is the story of Joseph. Worth a read or at least watch "Joseph and his Technicolour Dream Coat", which tells the story well. Essentially, Joseph had favourable times but also some incredible lows – Slavery! False Accusation! Prison! Now as he stands before his brothers, he recognises the hand of God in all that got him to this point, both the good and the bad, and how it was all about saving the children of Abraham.

The major challenge with this worldview is in the idea that if all things are working together to achieve God's outcome, there is no place for unforgiveness. Since the actions of his brothers were part of God's plan, then although hurtful and spiteful, they needed to be forgiven to reach the endpoint, and this indeed was the response of Joseph, weeping (with joy) and not fuming (with anger). So, forgiveness is not an option for Christians but rather the logical outworking of a mature theology. It should characterise all our activity and flavour our very existence.

So here is the challenge for us all.

First, we must learn to interpret the world with the view of the activity of God. We all know people who make it "all about me" and who see that everything is about the universe 'picking on me'. But it should not be so with us. As I grow older, I am sometimes privileged to see the purposes of the hard times, but God has no obligation to do so. We must accept with faith that God has worked for our good and his purposes even though we cannot see it. When these things are revealed, more often than not, I find that the hard times have been learning experiences for use in later ministry.

Second, we must learn to live in a way that respects this worldview. This will relate to our dealing with others. Like the Canaanite women, we need to be acting on Faith. Although Jesus had no obligation to act, she believed, and he honoured that belief. It is such an easy thing to be caught up in reality and ignore the possibility. Although we must be aware of limitations in our congregations, we must not get caught up in the wave of naysayers when the fundamental fact is that "Our God is Able".

This is a challenge for us all. To live by faith and not by sight. Maybe we can become convinced that it is too hard, but maybe trying some baby steps will get us there. If we start with trust in God for the small things, then we can graduate to the things harder to put into his hand. It is how I have gotten to where I am, but I still have so much more to learn still, but it all begins with seeing the bigger picture – God's plan.

Shall you and I take up this challenge?

AMEN