

## **WHEN LIFE IS TRANSFORMED – SEPTEMBER 16, 2007**

Let us begin this reflection on transformation by getting our imagination in action.

See yourself as part of a struggling new Christian group in your town. You have got caught up in the excitement of the story of this Jesus of Nazareth and believe that he is the one sent by God. All of you in the small church cluster are new at the faith and you are eager to learn all you can from those who had been in the faith for some time. Many of these people had met people who had personally met Jesus or knew someone who did.

How exciting it must have been to walk with this Jesus either before or after his resurrection. But, at the same time, you were aware that it was not politically correct to be a follower of Jesus. You had to keep quiet about it and meet together after dark out of fear of possible persecution.

At one of these weekly meetings you can sense fear in all those around you. Who was this Saul of Tarsus they are speaking about? You learn that he is a brilliant and devout man who is determined to stamp out Christianity. And then you hear that he is coming to your town next week and you shake with fear about what it might mean to you. Are you strong enough to withstand his questions? Will you buckle under the fear and recant your new faith? Might your life be in danger? Saul of Tarsus is coming next week and you are petrified. Stephen, a good man, had just been stoned to death in Saul's presence. In that town Saul laid waste to the church and entering house after house, he dragged men and women off to prison. Would that be our fate?

Next week comes and you hear Saul is delayed. What happened you ask? Saul was struck down on the road to Damascus and became blind when he was on the highway and is locked in a room with friends. Could it be that God was finally punishing this man?

Next week, you hear more news. Ananias, one of the revered men of the church, had gone to see this hated Saul. Would you believe it, Ananias had baptized Saul as a Christian. Saul now calls himself Paul to indicate that he is a new man. They say he is transformed and using all his skills now for Jesus. The local group of believers had a great discussion. Do you expect us to believe this story and trust Paul? We do not know what Paul will have to do to prove himself as a true believer to us. Why should we trust this man?

Transformation: the seemingly impossible and unexpected happens which transforms a life and in turn a community.

Another story: King Henry 2<sup>nd</sup> in England is tired of fighting with the leaders of the English church. He conceives a plan. He will appoint his drinking and jousting buddy Thomas Becket to be Archbishop of Canterbury and then all will be well. Thomas is thunderstruck by this suggestion which is really a royal command. I am not even a priest; how can I be a bishop? Henry was adamant and so in spite of the protests of outrage from

the clergy and other bishops, Thomas was ordained a priest one day and consecrated a bishop the next.

Becket, in the robes of his office, goes into the cathedral overwhelmed by the task before him. He knows that his old pal King Henry wants him to make the church more obedient to the king. Becket, not even a strong believer, looks at his situation. He places himself before God – what is he to do? In very short time, he changes dramatically, and becomes a man of prayer and faith. His own bishops and priests are very skeptical. Is this another trick to gain our trust then use us for the king's pleasure?

We all know the end to this story – the king in fury speaks out one day. Will no one rid me of this man? Becket was killed on the altar steps. The king was overwhelmed by what had happened and had to do penance for some time before the populace settled down. Becket was declared a saint.

Transformation in a human being: is it real?

This week, our text asks some perplexing questions. Paul, a powerful leader in the early church, reminds us that he once hunted down and persecuted Christians. One day something happened in Paul's life, and he walked away from persecution and began spreading the gospel about Jesus Christ, the very one against whom he had led a vendetta. It does make us wonder.

When people change and are transformed, do we give them the room to change? Do we give people a break or the resources to begin a new life, or are we stuck in cynicism, old patterns, or our own self-interest? Do we want people like the neighbourhood bully or a terrorist to be able to grow and change? Do we have the capacity to accept a person's new life and be supportive? How does our own past shape our ability to allow others to grow and change?

Do you not wonder how Paul was truly received by those believers who had seen the destruction in the past? How do we enable people to grow and change and how do we nurture this as a congregation. Do we honour the possibility of transformation? It is not easy but Jesus held out newness of life to all people and it was often the persons people least expected who reached out and accepted the healing. Others stood skeptically on the side wondering why Jesus bothered with these "types of people". To Jesus, everyone was a creation of God and worthy of the chance to change; come back and follow God!

Our gospel reading contained beloved parables which helped Jesus to make his point about the need to open our eyes and hearts as we built community. Our Luke 15 readings contain two wonderful parables we all know. If we seriously look at these stories, we see powerful concepts we need to heed as Christians.

The setting was a common one for Jesus. He had attracted a crowd of the curious which included tax collectors and sinners. The poor tax collectors were so hated as they collected the tax for the conquering Romans. They also were often dishonest and

collected even more to line their own pockets. The “sinners” were those who broke the law or at least did not keep all the laws of the Hebrew leaders. The Pharisees stood by looking at the crowd disgusted that Jesus spent any of his time with these folk or why he sat to eat with these sinners when he should be more concerned about following the laws of God which forbid all of this intermingling.

Then he tells the story of the 100 sheep. When one is lost, the owner leaves the other 99 where they are and goes and hunts for the lost. When the sheep is found, the owner shouts for joy and can not be quiet. He has to tell everyone that the lost has been found. Share my joy in this great event – come and celebrate with me.

Jesus says to the Pharisees that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

This was not the message they wanted to hear – they were into rules, not transformation and liberation from sin, anger, hatred and fear.

Then Jesus, to strengthen his point, tells the story of the woman who has ten silver coins and notices one is missing. She was anything but subdued and immobilized by this occurrence. She literally tore her house apart, sweeping all the floors. Suddenly, she finds the lost coin. She is ecstatic and rushes out to those around her and shares her good news. I love her words: “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost”. Again, Jesus says there is more rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents than over all the good things the faithful are doing.

You can imagine the reaction of the Pharisees to this story. What is all this fuss about over one coin? They had no understanding that these ten coins may be all she owned. They were incapable of the act of rejoicing at the best of time, always being sober about the faith, careful in their rituals and very clear about their superiority before God for all their acts of obedience.

Jesus gives many messages to the faithful in these passages. First: What is wrong with you, O people of the faith? Are you incapable of joy? Can you not heartily rejoice when an individual discovers God, repents, accepts God’s forgiveness and experiences a transformation in their life? Do you not want to be part of the rejoicing and celebration in heaven when a sinner discovers God?

Jesus speaks with authority when he claims that this act of assisting all people regardless of their status, race, nationality or gender to discover God, repent and receive the forgiveness and blessing of God is the work of the faithful. Joy and thanksgiving should be on all believers’ lips when this occurs.

Finally, Jesus urges the faithful to be less selfish. Do not hold onto your faith alone, share with those around you and expect great things to happen. Do not be resentful as was the older brother in the Prodigal Son parable. Learn to be open to the generosity of God to all his creation and celebrate his loving kindness to all.

Transformation: God holds out this possibility to all his creation.

Come and follow me and I will make you fishers of men and women. What God has to overcome in us is our hesitation to believe this is possible and the heart to accept into the fold those who have hurt us or been examples we abhor. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let yourself be afraid, for I am with you says our God. I will give you the spirit to be my instrument for good.

St. Paul had to overcome the skepticism of Christians who later found that God had chosen wisely as Paul became the great early builder of the faith and the church.

Jesus words are to all of us in these parables. You are my church. To you the community of faith rests the responsibility to welcome newcomers into the transformational life with God. Always we need to remember that Jesus speaks of the need for joy and celebration as we gather in the faith and share what we have experienced with one another.

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