

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
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"Nobody wants reality!"

Mark 9: 30-37, Psalm 139, James 4:1-6

The Jesus I grew up with was portrayed in our children's bible as an angelic figure, nice and clean, with a soft smile, soft hands, white robe, a glow of quiet gentle peacefulness around him. He was a Jesus that went to the cross without complaining, in complete and effortless surrender to the will of God. A man who was nice and polite and never, ever did anything the neighbours would not have approved of.

A Jesus living very much like the ideal James describes in his letter: Pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy, righteous and full of wisdom, sowing peace wherever he went. Somebody that made me feel small, helpless and impotent since it didn't require much insight into my personality to know that I would never be that perfect.

It wasn't until later that I began to understand that there was another side to Jesus, and another side to his story. An uncomfortable side, more difficult to understand, but a side that brought him much closer to real life and our experience of it.

The bloody side.

The lonely Jesus, at pains to explain to his disciples who he is and what he has come to do, and what will happen to him. Not meeting with even the faintest trace of understanding by those closest to him.

Jesus in Gethsemane, crying, terrified by the events that are moving towards him. Jesus on the cross, suffering one of the most torturous deaths ever invented by mankind, abused, beaten, blood gushing from wounds all over his body.

I know, talking so graphically about blood, wounds and suffering is in bad taste. Hymns that refer to such hideous realities have become increasingly unpopular, and surely, singing sweetly of the suffering and cross is not appropriate is it? Surely, wallowing in the imagery and surrounding it with a pink and rather melodramatic cloud as is done in some 19th century hymns, can hardly be called appropriate and suitable to the awesome gruesomeness of the story?

However, I sometimes wonder if isn't all too convenient for us as people who tend to sanitise suffering and death out of our lives anyway. Is it possible that we are removing an essential part of what Christ and Christianity is about in this way?

Is it possible that in the process we are creating an illusion of life that is much more benign than life actually is? And, smoothing over and covering up a lot of pain and hardship in the process, disallow ourselves to connect to Jesus in a way that could help us live a life that is much more grounded and aware of what is going on around it, a life much more whole and real than the image we so desperately hang on to? The image that life will be good, prosperous, controllable, safe and peaceful as long as we do the right things and live the right way. The illusion that if we will only take our place on Jesus' right hand and take charge all will be well? Banning anything out of our minds and our existence that does not square with it?

Why so squeamish?

Watched the news lately? Heard some of the horrible stories that have been aired on radio or tv? Read the papers? Watched some documentaries about Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, the Sudan? Or to stay closer to home, the news items about bullying, teenage suicide rates, domestic violence and the like? And do you really think, that as long as we are nice to each other, and do the right thing by each other, we will be safe?

Dream on! I think we all know too well that that is not true. That bad things happen, all the time, even to us, even to ours, no matter how much we try to ignore or deny it. And none of us is safe. Teenage suicide rates are soaring, depression is rife, people die in terrible accidents, at work, on the road or at home, illness wreaks havoc indiscriminately, no matter what age you are, how healthy you try to be, or what social stratum you are a part of. Under the surface of our affluent, fortunate society, in spite of all the financial, social and medical security we enjoy, there still lurks violence and death beyond our control.

It was all these things that came to my mind when I reflected this week on the gospel reading where we find Jesus trying to prepare his disciples for what is to come: His suffering and death. He tries to share with them the reality he can see approaching: betrayal, suffering, death, but hope beyond that. They do not understand and they do not even seem to really try to.

"They are afraid" it says. And I think most of us would be able to understand that. Because we are afraid when things like that come close: suffering, death, betrayal, injustice, pain.

We don't know what to do, we don't understand, and we don't want to know.

We don't like to be confronted with a reality that leaves us feeling impotent, helpless, and out of control. Because sometimes it just seems too much. It is just too hard to deal with it all, so ignoring seems a sensible option. And sometimes it is. We can't live with the reality of what happens and what might happen in life in the forefront of our minds all the time.

And I don't say we need to. What I try to say is that in the life as Jesus lived it, as it has come to us through the gospels pain, suffering and death are not

denied or ignored, but given a place. Recognising that it was in that place, more than anywhere else, where the what and who Jesus was came into its own. Where he didn't go around suffering and in pain, but showed it up for what it was by going through it and proving it to be powerless in the face of love and trust in the power of life lived in God's image.

Unfortunately the disciples aren't with him when he talks about what is ahead. What better way to avoid difficult question than to start squabbling about something else? And is it something else? Or does the possibility of Jesus no longer being there trigger their dispute?

Who is going to be first they ask among themselves? Who is most favourably looked upon by our master? Who has got the highest marks so far? They bicker about it, competing for honours they presume will be shortly given out. Who will come out on top?

It must have been excruciatingly painful for Jesus I think. Telling people you are going to die, and them starting to discuss the succession.....

Jesus then puts a child in their midst.

He confronts their dreams of power and glory with something they would have rushed straight past in their desire to become number one.

In those days you see, children were real nobodies. Most of them died well before they could ever grow up and thus they were not really counted as people before they reached an age where there was a reasonable chance they would survive to become of some economical value to their parents. Not that mothers didn't love their children at the time, but they were not the precious, spoiled and pampered little people that grow up in our society.

They were more like the children that live on rubbish dumps in developing countries, abjectly poor, dying like flies. Mostly not expected to get anywhere in life, if they lived at all, that is.

Look, says Jesus, while you are talking about being first, take a minute to look at this child, who we all know is at the very bottom of the heap. And know that it is those I embrace and put in the middle to give all my attention. If you want to be with me, be something in my Kingdom, you'll have to learn to direct your gaze downward towards them instead of up towards the top, stoop instead of scramble to get to the top of the ladder. In them you will meet me. Embracing them you will be embracing me.

He leaves it at that, and again the disciples don't seem to understand.

And do we?

Does it mean that we have to be good to children? Make sure they do not suffer hunger, or poverty? Make sure they are not kept in detention, do not cross oceans in desperation and leaky boats, are not put in the frontlines

when a war is on, will not lose limbs when crossing mine fields, and won't ever die because of lack of care?

Yes, it certainly means that. But there is more.

Something that will meet with more resistance in us than when we listen to the call in the letter from James to be pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy, righteous and full of wisdom.

That is the fact that when we really want to follow Jesus and truly be his followers we'll have to let go of our self importance, of the structures we feel safe in, where everything has its place and life consists of being good and working hard at being better. That we will have to become people that live dangerously, prepared to be touched and moved to care that goes way beyond the call of duty. People prepared to let go of certainties and securities most people would not want to go without.

Every Sunday we celebrate the life of one who stooped so deep it should take our breath away. We remember the terrible suffering and unjust death of one who did not deserve to die but shared the fate of millions of others that die an undeserved death at the hands of people that justify their deeds from a position of fear. If we don't kill him worse will happen. An argument as old as the world, still in good use today.

It is this Jesus whose life we commemorate today. Not somebody that was just a very lovely and nice man, but somebody that went through hell because he did not yield to the standards of the world but chose to live according to the standards of Gods Kingdom.

Who stooped to embrace what others would not even deign to look at, not from a position of comfort and power, but by shattering every illusion that a good life, a life like God wants it, will keep us safe and make us come out on top. Jesus was not afraid to let go of prestige, wealth, security, even his life, to live with God's wisdom guiding his every step and kneel down before that which others would have regarded as of no importance. He was a single tree growing by the stream of God's mercy, blooming and bearing fruit.

He overcame envy, selfish ambition, boastfulness, and cravings. He lived a life truly open to wisdom from above, a life of sharing and serving, of stooping down and scooping up. A life that did not count the cost but lived in trust that God would make justice and peace prosper where life was led according to his will and surrendered to his purposes. With his eyes wide open to the reality of suffering, violence and death surrounding him and accepting it as part of life, part of the journey that leads to God's Kingdom. No cheap and easy grace for him, but the hard won grace of dying to self, to illusion, to success and making space for God to transform that death and suffering into something new and vital. May we have the courage to follow him there as well. Amen.