

Sunday, May 19th, 2019, Fifth Sunday in Easter

Readings: Acts 11:1-18, Psalm 148, Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

## Anxiety, Hope and Meaning

### Introduction

At 12 years of age, I won a place at a 'selective school' in Sydney, which my brother – six years my senior – had attended and from which he had only recently graduated. It was a disquieting experience, not because I feared anything in particular, although I imagine, that in such an academic 'hot-house' I was already competing with my brother 'in my head'. No, it was not fear as such, but a vaguer feeling. For the first time in my life I was discovering my freedom: the pressure of the freedom to think for myself, to be myself, to become myself. It was in a word, anxiety. A few minutes ago, I quoted a statement of the contemporary British philosopher, Simon Critchley: let me repeat it here, because it gets as close to anything I have read, to explain anxiety: *Anxiety is the experience of the tide going out, the seawater draining away, revealing a self, stranded on the sand. Anxiety is that basic mood when I first distinguish myself from the world and become self-aware.* Anxiety then, I think is all about the first signs of our freedom, the freedom of beginning to become ourselves as individuals, of carrying the responsibility of building our personal identity.

Let's think about anxiety: first through the window of the movie *Lion*, and then turn to the biblical texts before us; in particular Peter's experience of conversion in the Book of Acts, and then the experience of John's congregation, in the Gospel

### The Film Clip: *Lion*

In our scene, we find Saroo in crisis. Let's recall his situation, a real story. Saroo was adopted as a child 'orphan' by an Australian couple, Sue and John, having lost his family in Khandwa, central west India, and grew up in Hobart. Gradually, he becomes aware of his identity: an adopted child with an unknown past. In his early years, he basks in the love of his adopted parents, but as he matures, it is as if "the tide goes out and he remains stranded on the sand". As he becomes increasingly self-aware, anxiety strikes and he is driven to find his long-lost Indian family; and, in the process, himself. In the clip, we see his agonizing struggle as he flashes back to childhood memories – imagined and real – of his brother, mother and the water tower of his unknown home town, which has remained with him. As he struggles with his anxiety – painful as it is – *there is hope in this search, hope for identity, hope for meaning.*

### The Biblical Readings

To the story of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles.

### The Acts: Peter

What happens here? Up till recently, Peter has identified with Jewish Christian aspirations: in fact, the only Christians at the time, were Jews, still bound by the traditional Jewish ways of seeing things, through the purity laws: a religious mental construct which divided the world up into what was considered pure and impure, clean and unclean: food and people. In our reading, we are told that Peter has been misbehaving, becoming altogether too liberal about the rules.

Accordingly, he is called back to Jerusalem to render accounts, to explain himself to the Christian powerbrokers: possibly among them the arch-conservative, James the brother of Jesus. In his defence, he refers to the vision, the dream, about food, which he interprets as the Spirit, freeing *him* to eat freely. It is the first chink in the armour of a rigid, stringent, rule bound, world view.

But in fact, as we dig deeper, it is not his liberalized eating habits alone that have gotten him into trouble, as much as those with whom he has begun to associate: in particular, a man called Simon the Tanner. Just who is this Simon the Tanner? Well, Simon the Tanner, is mentioned in more detail, prior to today's reading. He was a religious, socio-economic outcast. He was a "dirty" man in both a literal and a figurative sense. Tanners were people who worked with dead animals. The

filth and the stench were appalling. Simon was the object of disdain. He was in every sense a pariah, an untouchable, a *persona non grata*. Almost anyone would have felt superior to him.

But a problem: Simon the Tanner *had joined* the 'Jesus movement' and it appears that he had begun to find acceptance there, that Jewish society, framed by the definitions of people clean and unclean, had never given him. And so, it seems that, Simon the Tanner actually hosted Simon Peter the apostle in his home, Simon the Tanner offered Simon Peter a bed for the night, and by extension his Christian friendship. Simon Peter and Simon the Tanner are joined by Christ. It is then that Peter is accused of breaking the rules, the purity rules.

Peter is clearly in a state of anxiety: not in the sense of fearful of the opposition back in Jerusalem as such, but in the sense of standing alone, stranded on the sand, no longer able to feel cosy and at home in the traditional, conservative world view, that Jewish Christians had inherited from their Jewish roots. Peter, anxious as he is, is beginning the journey to freedom, the journey to becoming himself, to becoming authentically Christian. *There is hope in this search, hope for identity, hope for meaning.*

### **What Can We Say Then?**

What then can we say about this process of discovery?

*First, that the story of Simon Peter was the story of the early Church.* There was an intuitive sense that the experience of the generosity of God in Jesus shown to outsiders, somehow challenged the old rule-bound traditions of the pure and impure, the clean and the unclean which societies generally build for themselves.

*Second, to use Paul Tillich's expression, Jesus became "the ultimate concern" which qualified all others.* In other words, if one were to follow Jesus, all other considerations were secondary: social status, colour of skin, cultural definition, gender identity, sexual definition - none can be and must never be determinative.

*Finally, may I conclude with a personal comment.* Over many years of thinking, reading and writing, what concerns me most is the almost universal conformism of Christians. Instinctively, we look back at tradition as the defining framework for faith. We are frequently suspicious of new thought, hostile to new insights, to new constructions with regard to faith's content. But the doing of Christian theology, the thinking out of the faith, is not ultimately about the repetition of tradition, the recital of rules that have over time become cemented as inflexible givens. In the light of Easter, Christian thinking is always to be open to the new. Let us be clear: if Peter had not spoken up and defended his new world view that in Christ, there are no unclean people, that people are equal, Christianity would never have made its mark: it would have faded back into the synagogue and been forgotten. It was the new progressive theological and social vision that gave Christianity, its energy and its character, which enabled Christianity's entry into the Greek world and from there, the Roman world and finally, what has become the modern world.

The anxiety of new thinking is at the very same moment a creative experience, through which hope and meaning are discovered. I remain a member of the Uniting Church in Australia, because it is one of the few faith institutions in this country, that carries the courage of Easter.

