

- Challenge violence, injustice and oppression, and work for peace and reconciliation?
- Protect, care for and renew life on our planet?

We need not be overwhelmed by these marks of mission, but perhaps choose an aspect of one as a personal focus this upcoming Lenten season. God-knows what flavoursome fruit might be harvested?

And may we not neglect our own spiritual nourishment – such as prayer, study, and Eucharist....

As Doreen, an American woman on missionary service in Venezuela many years ago, expressed:

“Before, I went to Sunday Communion and felt content. As a missionary, I go to daily Communion and know it is not enough.”

Helen Roud

Ordinary 8 (Epiphany 8) Sunday before Lent

03/03/19

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-13
1 Corinthians 15:51-58
Luke 6:39-49

Reflection

I’m delighted that the tomato season is well underway. My own ‘Minister’s Choice’ variety (originating in Italy), is flourishing in a pot on the decking, and I’m currently monitoring two large, pear-shaped fruits gradual ripening, with heightened anticipation! But I’m also partial to those lovely, bite-sized ‘Sweet One Hundreds’ that burst with flavour, and fruit in abundance. We are blessed locally, with access to many tomato varieties, shapes, colours and flavours to enhance our salads, salsas and a multitude of other seasonal dishes.

The diversity of our personal and collective spiritual fruits is also a blessing. But today’s readings caution us to possible pitfalls and guide us towards healthy fruitfulness in our spiritual life and growth.

I heard the following words recently, shared by a Kiwi woman reflecting on her faith journey:

“I went to Ethiopia, wanting to save the world. I returned nine years later knowing I couldn’t even save myself”

The woman - I’ll call her ‘Annie’ – was deeply impacted by her missional experience. Annie returned home from Ethiopia in personal crisis. She was suffering a crisis of vocation and a crisis of meaning – she was deflated, questioning her own worth and purpose in life. What’s more, the whole foundation of her life – her affluent, secular, western cultural context was called into question. But Annie also returned with a seed sown in her heart. A Christian colleague with whom she had shared a simple home in that impoverished African country, had revealed through word and action, a strong foundation on which Annie could rebuild her life.

Slowly but surely, in the midst of a loving Christian community, Annie found healing, peace and acceptance – acceptance of herself and her own limitations; acceptance of other people, and cultures very different from her own; she experienced healing for the woundedness she had both received and inflicted during her somewhat blind and at times, impatient and zealous crusade; and she discovered the peace which passes all understanding, found in Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate.

“I went to Ethiopia, wanting to save the world. I returned nine years later knowing I couldn’t even save myself”

Annie isn’t set on saving the world these days, but her Christ-centred, Sabbath-keeping, community-serving life is most certainly fruitful. Like juicy, bite-sized ‘Sweet One Hundreds’, her spiritual fruit is flavoursome and abundant. And my meeting her recently has changed me! Her story, her honesty and humility have touched me and impacted my life in a way she will never know. To use a Maori and Pasifika analogy – Te Raranga - a thread of her life (along with many others) has now been woven into my mat.

Deutero-Isaiah provides a wonderful analogy of the fruitfulness of Godly living through the water cycle, a cycle utterly critical to life itself on earth (and severely threatened in today’s climate-changing context): *‘As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.’*

However, these words of promise and hope for Israel’s salvation describe an event – the coming of the longed-for Messiah, the incarnate Word - rather than simply a divine message.

The fruit we long to bear as disciples of Jesus (the Word), takes time to develop and mature. Somewhere along the way, like Annie, we realise that

our own personal ‘tree’ doesn’t have to fruit and feed the whole world (much as we might wish that it could). We also come to realise that our personal crop will be unique and is reliant on a good supply of the right nutrients.

Our spiritual growth - our inner life, our personal development - relies on a balanced diet of Christian love, acceptance, boundaries and challenge. The sixth chapter of Luke’s gospel is full of challenge. Worldly foundations of religious doctrine begin to crack when Jesus challenges the Pharisees: *“Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?”* Foundations of social, physical, emotional and spiritual comfort crumble with the challenges of his blessings and woes. (Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the persecuted.) Foundations of self-interest, judgement and self-preservation quake as Jesus exhorts us to: *‘Love our enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.’* The logs in our eyes begin to fall as we attempt to live out the command: *‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.’*

Somewhere along The Way, we discover that growth and fruitfulness involve willingness to change and be changed – a lifelong process, moving us from dependence to independence to interdependence.

As individuals and as Christian community, approaching the season of Lent, what might encourage us in spiritual growth and fruitfulness?

Perhaps our Anglican Communion’s Five Marks of Mission are a helpful guide:

How might we:

- witness to Christ’s saving, forgiving and reconciling love for all people? (do you have a bite-sized witness of your journey in faith, that you’re willing to share?)
- Build welcoming, transforming communities of faith?
- Stand in solidarity with the poor and needy?