

Sermon 27 March 2011, Lent 3: Deep Longing

Exodus 17: 1-7, John 4

The world has watched over the past two months as the people in one Middle East country after another have taken to the streets to demand freedom, social justice, and above all, dignity. The people are thirsty.

Among the thousands who found their voices were women. In Bahrain hundreds of women dressed in traditional black tunics participated in demonstrations against the government. In Yemen a small number of women were part of the protests there. The most dramatic example of women's participation was in Egypt, where men and women alike, from all walks of life, participated in the popular revolution which led to Hosni Mubarak's ousting. At its height it is estimated that one quarter of the million protesters were women. Veiled and unveiled women shouted, fought, and slept in the streets alongside men.

However, when hundreds of women marched to Cairo's Tahrir Square to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March, they were verbally abused and told they should go home. The women were demanding equal rights and an end to sexual harassment. They had good reason to be demonstrating. 'We fought side by side with men during the revolution, and now we're not represented,' said one young woman. She said this after learning that the military council, which is ruling the country until elections can be held, did not appoint a single woman to the committee which will draft constitutional amendments. 'They can't just send us home after the revolution,' another woman said. We are half the population. If we stay silent, we will continue to experience all the discrimination of the past.

While Egyptian women have more rights than women in other countries in the region, they fear that unless they are included in the processes shaping the country's new laws, their rights may be eroded. One young woman who came to the demonstration with friends said, 'I thought Egypt was improving, that it was becoming a better country. If it's changing in a way that's going to exclude women, then what's the point? Where's the democracy?' (From *Spirit Sightings, Seasons of the Spirit*, Sandra Rooney)

Where do you see in your community thirsting for justice and dignity?

What is our role in promoting justice and dignity for others?

For what do you thirst?

I invite you to pause right now. Close your eyes if you like; be still. Take some time to be. Listen to the desires of your heart. What do you want? What do you need right now — in your life — in general? How would you name that desire?

Time has passed since last week's reading. Abram and Sirah are long gone, but the people are still on the move. Now Moses is leading the Israelites out of the same Egypt we spoke of earlier. These people too are moving out of slavery and injustice to freedom. It is a long journey through harsh country. Physically and psychologically like the journey of Lent.

In the wilderness, the people whinge and complain to Moses in no uncertain terms. They are thirsty. 'Give us water to drink', they demand. 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'

Where is their trust? Where is their hope? Where is their patience?

Moses cried out to God, in desperation 'What am I going to do with this people?' 'They are almost ready to stone me!' Moses alone it seems draws aside. He paused, distressed and turned to God, and listened; and discerned the way ahead. God showed him.

'There is water here already in the desert.' (Remember the little Prince last week 'The wonderful thing about the desert is that somewhere there is a well of water.')

'Strike the rock and water will come out of it, that the people may drink'.

The water was already there in the wilderness if they knew where to look and how to find it.

Even on Uluru in the middle of the desert, the centre of Australia, there is water; if you know where to look... listen...

For what do you thirst?

What about the people around you? For what do they thirst?

Macrina Wiederkehr speaks of the need to pause in our day; to stop, to listen, to notice within ourselves and beyond; to take stock of what is clamoring to be heard; to let the noise settle and sometimes an answer emerges.

You may have heard the story about some westerners who hired a few bushmen guides to help them travel through the Kalahari Desert. Not being used to moving at the pace their employers were expecting, the bushmen suddenly sat down to rest, and no amount of persuasion could induce them to continue the journey until they were ready. The reason for this much needed rest, the bushmen explained, was that they had to wait for their souls to catch up. The bushmen of the Kalahari called this ancient knowing 'the tapping of the heart.'

Many of us can relate to this story. We, too, can remember moments when we have heard the tapping of the heart. Listening to that deep inner voice of the soul and monitoring the call to take care of ourselves can become a way of life. Most of us are in desperate need of breathing spells for the soul. Our days are frenetic — filled with activity. All of this takes a toll on the soul. Our conversations often centre around how busy we are, and phrases such as "I don't have time" become a frequent part of our dialogue. We find ourselves multitasking just to get through the day with some sense of accomplishment.

In regard to all this busyness in our lives, however, I would like to offer an encouraging word. Since most of us are actually busy doing good things, could it be that how we approach our work is the issue rather than how much we have to do? If we do not have healthy work patterns, then the tendency when someone tries to get us out of our workaholic mode is to look busy, talk about our busyness, and recite the mantra, 'I don't have time.'

All too often in today's corporate world the workaholic is revered and esteemed. Some employees wanting to climb the corporate ladder vie with co-

workers to see who can come in first and/or leave the office last. The game is a ruse, stealing personal time away from the individual. Unfortunately, a heart attack is often the wake-up call to slow down and re-evaluate what is essential in life.

How can we learn to open our heart to simple grace-filled experiences? How can we become more aware of the yearning in our hearts for the healing balm of solitude? These moments are available every day. They are offered to the workaholic just as frequently as to the mindful person. It is all a matter of living with open eyes and sometimes a rearrangement of our values.

We belong to this earth, and the work we do is ultimately for the purpose of making our world a better place in which to live. When we begin our day, most of us probably do not approach our work with the awareness and belief that we are artists involved in continuing the work of creation. From the most sublime to the most menial, work is creativity. If we could truly believe this, many things might change in our workplaces and in our world at large. It is not necessarily our work that is the problem; perhaps it is our inability to be a loving companion to our work.

The Indian poet Kahlil Gibran suggests that our work is our love made visible. The way we approach our work is vital to our happiness and the good we are going to be able to do as artists and co-creators with God. The attitude with which we approach our work determines whether or not our work will become a love made visible.

No matter what your work entails, realise you are an artist. In some small way you are continuing the work of creation.

On Tuesday, I was greatly exercised about an email I received early in the morning. I became very tense, and realised I was too het up to make a clear decision. I sat on my bed, intending to meditate, *Jacque* (the cat) on my lap.

I was too distracted even to pray, so for a short while I read a light novel.

I noticed my body relax. I got some perspective. I realised the importance of waiting — holding the issue gently.

I went on to my next appointment. Then, later in the day, calmer, clearer, I replied to the email.

As the saying goes ‘Be still, for the presence of the Lord is moving in this place’.

Work is participating in the ongoing gift of creation.

There was once a king who was overburdened with the tasks of state. One day, he commented to his wife, ‘If only I could know which matters were the most important, I could use my time more effectively and be a better king.’

So the queen urged him to consult with one of the wise men of the kingdom. One by one the king called the wise men to him: scholars and priests, politicians and counsellors. Each had a different view about which matters were the most important.

Eventually, almost despairing of getting helpful advice, the king set off to visit a holy hermit who lived in the hills. As he approached the hermit’s dwelling, he saw the holy man digging his garden. The hermit hardly interrupted his

work as he listened attentively to the king's request for advice. 'I have two questions,' explained the king. 'On whom should I spend my time and focus my attention?' and, 'Which affairs are the most important, and should, therefore, be taken care of first?'

The hermit listened in silence, and continued to dig his garden.

The king realised that the hermit was struggling and tired. 'Here,' he said, 'I see you are tired. Give me the spade and I will do some digging for you.' The hermit thanked him and handed him the spade.

The king dug the hermit's garden for two hours, before asking him the two questions again, but still the hermit did not answer. Instead, he took back the spade, with the comment, 'You rest now, and I'll dig.'

But the king refused, and he went on digging, until sundown. When he finally put down the spade, he said to the hermit, 'I came to ask you two questions. Since you cannot, or will not answer me, I will go home now.'

The hermit replied, 'See, someone is running here. Let's see who it is.'

The king turned to see a bearded man running towards them, clutching his hands to a wound in his stomach. As he reached the king, he fell to the ground, moaning.

The hermit and the king quickly washed and dressed the man's wound as best they could, and the king bound the wound up with one of his own handkerchiefs and one of the hermit's clean rags. After a while, the blood stopped flowing from the wound, and the man asked for a drink of water. The hermit gave him a drink, and together the hermit and the king carried the man into the hermit's hut and laid him on the bed. Exhausted after the day's work, the king also fell asleep.

The next morning, when he awoke, the king saw that the wounded man was staring at him. 'Forgive me,' he begged the king.

'I don't know you,' the king replied. 'I have no reason to need to forgive you.'

Then the man confessed, 'I had sworn vengeance on you for executing my brother, and I followed you here to the hermit's home, planning to kill you. When you didn't return for so long, I came out of my hiding place, and was caught by your bodyguards, who recognised me and attacked me. I managed to escape, but I would have bled to death if you had not taken care of me. I wanted to kill you, but you saved my life. From now on, I will be your most faithful servant. Forgive me.'

Quickly, the king forgave the man and promised to have him cared for until his full health was restored.

Leaving the man, the king returned to the hermit, who was digging his garden again, just as on the previous day. 'For the last time,' he pleaded, 'will you answer my two questions? Otherwise I shall go away.'

'But you have had your answers,' the hermit replied.

'I don't understand', retorted the king.

'Yesterday,' the hermit explained, 'you had compassion for my weariness, and

you stayed here to help me dig my garden. If you had gone straight home, our friend here would have attacked you. So the most important task was to show compassion. Later, when the man appeared here, it was the time to care for him and bind his wounds. Had you not done so, he would have died and would never have been able to make his peace with you. At that moment, he was the most important person, and caring for him was your most important task.'

So the answer to your questions is this: there is only ever one important time, and that is 'now'. And the most important person is the one who stands before us now. God gives us one opportunity at a time. The person I am with now and the task that lies immediately ahead of me are always more important than either the past or the future. The past has gone. The future may never happen. The present is the only reality. (Retelling of a story by Leo Tolstoy from *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, by Margaret Silf)