

Dennis W

Psalm 116.1-3,10-17

1 Peter 1.17-23

Luke 24.13-35

Gazing or just Lost in Thoughts

Sometimes, I easily offend people by not saying a word or moving.

I stare into space when I'm lost in thought or profoundly reflecting on something. I become oblivious to what is around me, and at times, this has led me to a spot of awkwardness. There are times when my stare or gaze is so intent I fail to see that there may be someone in my direct line of sight.

One of my closest friends has said that when this happens to me, it is almost as if the lights are on, but nobody is at home.

I don't mean to offend, but I know that an intense gaze or stare is uncomfortable for some people. When they see me, they see my eyes seemingly fixed on them and intently scrutinising them. The reality is that I may subconsciously see them, but I do not recognise them as part of my vision.

Often, I am roused from my thoughts by an interrogatory, "Why are you staring at me? What are you looking at?" Sometimes, it has been an angry voice, and I tend to jump when roused like that. That, in itself, ends up surprising the angry speaker as much as me.

Throughout the scriptures, we hear of various people looking intently. Jesus, sometimes when finding it hard to understand the ignorance of the people he is addressing, stared at the group. After looking intently at them, he would say what was on his mind.

For Peter and later Paul, before healing or teaching, they would also look at the people with such intent that the listeners felt comfortable. The silence would also add to the tension.

I have often said that should I contemplate higher study or writing a book, it will be on Mark chapter 10, a parallel chapter in Luke 18. I tend to favour Mark 10 over the Lukan version for a particular verse.

In these passages, we encounter a rich young and pious man who comes up to Jesus and says, "Good teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?"

What follows, of course, is a dialogue about the Sh'mah, the daily creed of the Israeli people, and a lament from the young man as he leaves Jesus, aware that the sacrifice that has been suggested is too much. Jesus then talks about the impossible and notes that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.

Whether the eye of the needle is, a sailing reference or a reference to a small gate in Jerusalem misses the point.

The story is nestled in the middle of a teaching point on the faith being simple to follow. Children had been denied the presence of Jesus, and Jesus took them on his knees and blessed them, saying, "To such as these belong the kingdom of God."

The young man's question is based on the adult understanding of what it is to follow God.

Hear, O Israel, our God; the Lord is One.

You shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength.

You shall bind this upon your wrists and your head.

You shall say this upon rising, in the middle of the day, entering and leaving your house, and resting at night.

And you shall teach it to your children and your children's children.

Jesus added this is the great first commandment, and a second is like it; you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

The dialogue that follows varies in the three synoptic gospels. Matthew explores which is the greatest commandment. Luke elicits the great parable "The Good Samaritan", and Mark offers us this one verse in Mark 10.21

Jesus looked at him intently and loved him.

For me, loving is the most critical part of Jesus' teaching. The faith, as taught to us, passed down according to tradition and law, is straightforward. We know what we are to do. But can we do it?

Fixing his gaze on the young man, in whom there is implied no malice or other intent, is a simple dilemma. Knowing what to do and being able to do what is required is sometimes not as easy as it looks.

Recently, in a conversation, I was challenged to present some of the teachings in a way that is more condemning than loving. I make that discernment myself, finding myself staring when challenged.

For me, it comes down to tolerance and acceptance. If I tolerate it, I place myself in a position where I believe I am right. Still, I allow you to think you are right and engage accordingly.

Suppose I accept your diversity of stance compared to mine. In that case, I remain respectful and loving in honouring your gift of life and freedom of thought.

Some things can never be tolerated in the world. Don't get me wrong: I will call out what I believe to be lacking in grace and love. But I also reserve the right to do as Jesus did: stare and love the creation on a journey to the fullness of life.

Uncle Garry Deverill, an Anglican priest from Pallawa lands (my land of origin), noted that the rival Anglican breakaway group, the Global Anglican Fellowship, has adopted this as their slogan.

'Proclaiming the unchanging truth in a changing world' can be translated as 'Pretending to be God when you're not' — just saying.

The largest body of membership in GAFCon is the Church of Uganda. The Ugandan Anglican Church is the same body championing the introduction of the death penalty for any person found or proven to be homosexual. The Church had suggested that the president was right to reject the bill, not because it was unacceptable, but because it lacked suitable punishment before the penalty was applied. And why? Because it is an unchanging truth that is found in Leviticus 18.22. It is also a constant truth that should segregate men and women in Church exclude menstruating women, tattooed men, and any person with short hair.

I'll go now.

Some of you just shifted in your seats uncomfortably. Some of you gazed forward, possibly in disbelief at what you heard or disbelief in hearing it said in Church.

I cannot tolerate what is being done there any more than the escalating violence in Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine and many other pockets of the world.

Oddly, all of those countries profess to be Christian. There is no acceptance, and there is no tolerance. There is only the taking of an eye and exacting an eye for an eye. The reality is that soon, everyone left will be blind.

Jesus, looking intently, said, "All things are possible for God." And we've been told what is required of us to bring and live a life of justice.

Sometimes, we all gaze and switch off the reality around us.

For Cleopas and his companion walking away from Jerusalem after the Passover, their eyes were glazed over. They were fixated on the events they had just witnessed. Their hopes of a glorious return of Israel to magnificence were dashed. They were so intent in their gaze that they did not recognise who was walking alongside them.

Then Jesus gives us this metaphor in his teaching. He explains the scriptures to them and talks about what he has done.

Then, accepting the fundamental gift of hospitality, he does something straightforward and loving. He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them.

It was in the receiving of the bread that the disciples knew the Lord Jesus.

Even though the scripture said, "and he vanished from their sight", he was still there.

Their gazing in disbelief was disturbed, not by knowledge, but in a simple act of sharing.

The disciples knew the Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

Oh, how Jesus must have looked at them the same way he did the rich young ruler. He must have looked at them as he gathered the simple children being taught the faith and blessed them.

Why must we make things so hard for ourselves?

Indeed, we must stop and celebrate the straightforward truth in the Bible left for us to show how God so loved the world.

Friday night was the last night of the Holy Month of Ramadan, in which the great fast celebrating the writing of the Quran ends. Eid Mubarak! To my dear Islam friends.

It is there we share a common heritage as children of Abraham. I may not agree or subscribe to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, but I accept the people who do.

And even though we may differ in how we see Jesus, the one thing in common is the hospitality of the evening meal. The ifta, the break-fast, is where the love of God is genuinely shared.

Indeed, you could say for them, as it was for the Jewish people and us, the Lord is known in the simple act of breaking the bread.

May we pray that all the world may have plenty of bread to break and share.