

Lent IV – year B 2024-03 -10

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we think of our mothers and I'm sure that we all have our own memories – hopefully good memories. One of the things my mother did from an early age was to teach all her children to say some prayers at night before going to sleep – remember – Gentle Jesus meek and mild, look upon a little child pity my simplicity and suffer me to come to Thee. Amen and variations thereon.

We were encouraged to go to Sunday School and even though mum was no church goer, eventually in her 60's she was confirmed and started going regularly to church in Canberra.

But how does God nurture us? Help us to grow in the faith. A man named James Fowler came up with these 6 stages of faith. He was a theologian and a psychologist and his interest in doing this work was trying to teach people how to evangelize more effectively. In the first three stages of faith development, we rely on some authority outside ourselves for spiritual beliefs.

As part of the **first stage**, -"Intuitive-Projective Faith" from our birth to the age of 2, our development is to do with the safety of the environment. If we experience consistent nurture, we will develop a sense of trust and safety about the universe and the divine. Negative experiences will cause us to develop distrust with the universe and the divine.

As young children, during this **first stage** of faith (3-7yrs), we followed the beliefs of our parents, tending to imagine or fantasize angels or other religious figures in stories as characters in fairy tales. We accepted unquestioningly statements like –

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

In the **second stage** of faith-"Mythic-Literal Faith" (7-12yrs), as children we tended to respond to religious stories and rituals literally, rather than symbolically. As we moved through adolescence to young adulthood, our beliefs continued to be based on authority outside of ourselves. God becomes anthropomorphic, human and because of our literal interpretation of myth, we fail to derive overarching concepts from the myths. We simply believe.

So Sunday School stories are told in a one dimensional format to reinforce faith in youngsters. Younger minds can't really deal in uncertainties; the walls of Jericho came tumbling down after the Israelites paraded around blowing their horns, we leave out speculations about earth quakes or tsunamis; David and Goliath, the small and weak shall triumph over the seemingly invincible; Jonah and the whale, well even children should question how someone could survive intact in the belly of a whale; Noah's ark and the great flood; the tower of Babel, etc.

With the onset of moving to high school or getting apprenticeships and needing to put into practice what has been learned, the believer often (though not always) transitions to stage 3.

In this **third stage** (12-18yrs), -"Synthetic-Conventional" With the onset of experience and deeper thinking, adolescence, and a realization that the world is indeed complex and often conflicting, the primary function of Stage 3 is to blend or synthesize all the spheres of the individual's world into a coherent whole. Faith can help to order the world according to our own plans, and it's through faith we can gain a sense of who we are. As individuals we tend to conform to the accepted beliefs without ever really reflecting on them. Most people remain at this level.

Those of us who have moved onto the **fourth stage** of faith (18-40yrs), - "Individuative-Reflective". There would have been a radical shift from dependence on others' spiritual beliefs to the development of our own. Fowler says, "For a genuine move to stage 4 to occur there must be an interruption of reliance on external sources of authority ... There must be ... a relocation of authority within the self".

This might have happened when we left home or there is some radical shift in the rules that govern our church e.g. the Anglican Church ordains women or is more accepting and welcoming of gay marriage, then we are thrown back on our own resources to deal with the changes.

This is a "demythologizing" stage. It is a time of restlessness with self-images and outlook. As we become ready for transition to stage 5 we find ourselves attending to what may feel like chaotic and disturbing inner voices; elements from a childish past, mixed with images and energies from a deeper self may signal readiness for something new.

In the **fifth stage** of faith, -"Conjunctive Faith" which is unusual before mid-life, we still rely on our own views, but move from self preoccupation or from dependence on fixed truths to acceptance of others' points of view. We tend to be more tolerant and begin to consider serving others. This serving could be seen as mentoring or leading by example.

Stage 5 knows the sacrament of defeat and the reality of irreversible commitments and acts. This stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience. It generates and maintains vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are "other."

There's a readiness for closeness to that which is different and threatening to self the way we looked at the world. (Including new depths of experience in spirituality and religious revelation), this stage's commitment to justice is freed from the confines of tribe, class, religious community or nation. And with the seriousness that can arise when life is more than half over, this stage is ready to spend and be spent for the cause of conserving and cultivating the possibility of others' generating identity and meaning.

At Stage 5 when there is the consideration of serving others how do we mentor those around us; children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces? Biblical examples are Elijah and Elisha, although Elijah gets the guernsey as Israel's greatest prophet, it could be argued that Elisha eclipsed him; Jacob and the son of his old age Joseph who goes on to save the Jews in Egypt, during the seven years of famine; maybe even Saul and David.

But this stage remains divided. It lives and acts between an untransformed world and a transforming vision and loyalties. In some few cases this division yields to the call that Fowler calls Stage 6.

Those who move to the **sixth and last stage** -"Universalizing Faith" of faith are rare.

As older adults, we begin to search for universal values, such as unconditional love and justice. Self-preservation becomes irrelevant. Jesus, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, and maybe even Alexie Navlny are examples of people in this form of spiritual development.

Sixth stagers are almost always spiritual leaders, as their complete openness and understanding of deep spiritual myths are contagious and many times are rebellious towards standing religious institutions.

They engage in fellowship and are mentors to all the other stages, and often time's people see them as almost "super-human" in their spiritual knowledge. These are people who can think outside of the box. They can see the bigger picture.

From history Plato mentored Aristotle who in turn mentored Alexander the Great; G.K. Chesterton had a profound effect on C.S. Lewis and Lewis' conversion to Christianity.

Late in the C18th at the age of 38 Mary Wollstonecraft, an early women's libber died giving birth to her second daughter also Mary who went on to marry Robert Shelley and write *Frankenstein*.

I've given you a little bit of a feeling this morning as to why we're all at different stages within our faith journey to encourage a more tolerant approach towards those whose views are different. I overheard a conversation about events coming out of the Synod about how those who held dear to conservative views were surprised at the absolute sincerity and depth of belief that met them coming from those who want change and realize that the world is changing around us rapidly and we are living in a multicultural society of many faiths.

What sort of mentor's are we? Most of us may think that our example of faithfulness isn't particularly robust perhaps, but until we have a go at telling others what Jesus means to us, even in the simplest stumbling ways, we may never know. All we have to do is believe that love will find a way.

Compassion and humility never go astray and will affect those we journey with. Probably most of us have the ability to reflect on our lives, to deal with the confusion and complexity of the situations that life throws at us and even if those situations are totally new, we still know enough to sit back and reflect and think our way through, rather than just go off ill prepared in any direction and follow the mob.

The other thing that most of us do as well is to talk to friends and colleagues, more than just hearing ourselves voice our concerns, but genuinely looking for wisdom and advice. This is particularly useful if the new situation we are dealing with has already been confronted and dealt with by those near to us.

Let us pray –

Father we give you thanks for our mothers. For the loving way they have nurtured us. Always give us the will to be patient with ourselves and with others, help us to discern your Spirit working in our lives and in the lives of those around us so that we all may grow and share in the faith and through that growth continue the work of your kingdom in this place. We make this prayer in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.

The Lord be with you