

Believing- nothing's for free

2 Samuel 18:5-9;31-33, Ephesians 4:25-5:2, John 6:6. 41-51 Rev J Shannon

Winter is here – sort of. I'm not used to Sapphire Coast winters so I never know what to expect. But in Bathurst or Canberra, there is no doubt, we are in it. Hunker down, pull the doona over your head and wait. In winter, the soil is cold. Life can feel cold.

I once spent a spring with my friend in Maine and she took the temperature of the soil every day because you can't plant your spring flowers until the soil is 54[°]F – that's about 12.22222+ Celsius. She'd ordered her plants – they were in the tubes...she was ready.

And everything else was waiting – waiting. There's stuff going on under there, in the dark. I know it. I watched the jonquil outside my window, praying it would flower before I left. It did – *just* before I left. I could sense it gathering up its energy. And then boom – or I should say, BLOOM!

There was only one, but that was enough.

Winter is not a threat. It is God's doona, where the divine puts everything to sleep so that nature can breathe and recover. The seasons act out their resurrection in floral death and fallen leaves; In the darkening solitude and by erupting in new growth. I love it! – sort of. Well, actually, I don't love the cold, or the dark, or the sadness... but I have to *believe* it will burst into life. I love that part.

I just have to believe.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians makes no threats. Each call appeals to our Christian identity which he takes as given....that we are essentially good people. ...and each case, like a good parent, he tells us why he is asking. He asks us to have the courage to speak out – to speak truthfully to our neighbours as we are all members of the same body. We have to look after the whole.

That means calling out bad behaviour. My friend just joined a church Committee in

another State. 3 times a man on the committee has had a go at her, shouting, diminishing her statements using language designed to intimidate and disregard her contributions¹. On the 3rd time, she called him out and told him he couldn't speak to her like that. An hour later the chair of the committee called her and apologised for 'his recalcitrant committee member' and thanked her for standing up to him. While she was telling me this, I was seething. The Chair shouldn't apologise for the other man – he should have called him out in the first place. Speak truthfully as we are all members of the same body. Is it really that hard?

I guess so. Especially if you don't believe the other has the capacity to be a better person. Or, unlike Paul, you don't believe in their essential good.

We could all go through Paul's list of do's and don'ts and see where we have failed. But I have to believe I can do better.

I particularly like how Paul explains why we can't let bitterness and anger take over us lest the devil gets a foothold. I used my favourite quote in the grief workshop.² It says, "Bitterness (or resentment) is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." I'd say that pretty well sums it up. The Devil gets a leg in.

And the passage reminds us that how we behave is how the world sees us. Oh! how it hurts to be condemned for the behaviour of other Christian leaders and sects. So much resentment towards churches comes from the front-page headlines of a few or from deluded evangelists that did not stop to respect the individuals before them.

Be kind and forgive as Christ forgave you – that's a hard one – and it gets tougher, 'walk the way of love just as Christ loved us ...and gave himself up for us.' Paul is appealing for sacrifice.

I have to believe it is worth it.

Belief is fragile. It can be broken.

The Samuel reading covers the gruesome death of David's son, Absalom. While David has been paralysed in his emotional struggle to save his son *or* save his kingdom, the matter has been taken out of his hands. Things have progressed with their own momentum and the passage ends with the Cushite telling the king it is over:

¹ Here the actual quotes have been removed so that no person can be identified.

² Unreliable sources attribute the quote to Nelson Mandela

“The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!”[a”(2 Sam 18-33)

David’s grief is palpable. Reading it today, 1000s of years later, has just as much effect as reading yesterday’s newspaper. It is such a sad story. I can feel it. The tragedy is real to me. The pathos of endings we never imagined.

And speaking of newspapers and tragedies...The case that threw me this week, was the fourth policeman involved with protecting the American Congress took his own life. The fourth. The tragedy that never ends.

Something in the storming of the capital on 6 January broke them. Was it that the crowd were ordinary Americans – not foreign terrorists? Or that the unbelievable – happened. Democracy was broken?

Belief is ethereal and fragile. Yet, we can have an overblown view of the power. How many times have you heard someone say, ‘I don’t believe in...’and here you can add anything you like, Christmas, COVID, birthdays, even God. Whether they believe or not has no impact, what so ever, on the existence. You can say you don’t believe in birthdays but like it or not, you’re a year older on a certain day. Christmas – well, it’s gonna happen once a year, with or without you. God is going to be a presence to millions of people whether you buy into it or not. People who say things like this are operating with closed systems.

And that’s interesting in itself because I wonder if, in fact, they are afraid of believing? The walls or up – the ramparts are manned – don’t let some idea break in or we’ll all be doomed.

Yet, when you DO believe in something and it’s shattered – that can be devastating. Seems an uneven equation.

Jesus said, I am the bread of life. In today’s passage, Jesus engages the authorities on what it means to not just satisfy hunger today but also that in the future – a future beyond imagination.

The passage is also a lesson in evangelism, remembering that people outside the church cannot be argued into believing that Jesus is anything more than a guy from Nazareth. People with a closed system will see what they see. For example, the Jewish authorities in this passage and the people in the Galilee synagogue saw Joseph’s boy, a local lad

with tickets on himself. Historical evidence, science, miracles, whatever – will not change people’s minds.

It seems that what we do have control over is disbelief while only God can call people to belief. It takes an action from God to evoke faith. Affirmations or witness – may help them along the way but in most likely it comes from divine intervention.

Weirdly, closed systems remind me of the rock that Moses hit. (Numbers 20:1-11) The people are out in the wilderness. The whole congregation goes to Moses and Aaron and asks why have you brought us here where there is no soil for planting and no water for the animals? Are we to die here? So off the brothers go, throw themselves before the tent and pray to God who tells them hit the rock with a staff and water shall flow. To me, the people are the rock. When they are ‘hit’ with the divine rod – belief flows and everyone can drink.

I’m not making this up. Divine intervention is written in this invitation from Jesus. It is not enough to come to Him or ‘believe’ in Him because Jesus clearly says ‘no one can come to me unless drawn by the Father.’ So, an evangelist can rant and rave to a person with a closed world. We can offer all sorts of invitations. We can literally take the horse to water but “it is divine magnetic force that pulls humans out of their worlds into faith.”³

The paradox of believing - Put simply, you can offer but only God can make it happen.

Then there is a further complication. The bread from heaven that is offered is identified with the “flesh”...that is, identified with the Jesus who gave his life for the world. The passage anticipates the death of Jesus. The feeding described by scholars “is in no means a free lunch. It includes the giving up of life in order to procure life”.⁴ Jesus’ offering has strings attached.

We must offer ourselves to partake in this everlasting spiritual meal.

What we have learned so far:

- Belief does not make things unreal – they exist separate from what you think.
- On one hand beliefs are like rocks – solid, impenetrable, closed and self-contained,

³ Texts for preaching, Brueggemann, Coursar et al p. 464

⁴ IBID

- **But**, like rocks, they can shatter...which is never nice.
- Like winter, transition and transformation happen under the surface, sometimes in dark places and they require movement that challenges beliefs.
- Sometimes to grow can be downright painful.
- That means that believing makes us vulnerable – and that’s hard enough in itself. But If we are not vulnerable – how will God enter our hearts?
- When we believe in Jesus – we are signing up for more than a bit of dough. (pun)

So, in winter – I have to believe there will be a spring.

In community, I have to believe we are called to be better – always striving for a fairer, kinder more just society.

In COVID, I have to believe there will be an end. This like an extended winter, sad, dark and sometimes lonely but also where we hunker down and wait for better conditions. And then we will bloom.

Yes, it will be a different world. This will not be last year’s flower or the year before. Each season is new. We will be different.

Where is God?

I believe in believing because that is the magnet that draws us closer – it is the divine whispering ...
 “Wait and see.”

Wait and see.

oOo⁵

⁵ ⁵ After a moment of silence, I asked the congregation to listen to *All for believing* by Missy Higgins but to imagine the song was *not* written by a 15 year old girl (it was) but rather that God had written them a personal letter. [All For Believing - Missy Higgins lyrics. - YouTube](#)