

God in the stats – fruits of the Spirit

Kings 2:1-13; Galatians 3:1,13-25

Rev J Shannon

The Spirit features big time in both these readings. This is the final chapter for Elijah as he passes the mantle to his faithful friend, Elisha. Only the work of the Spirit of God can supply Elisha with the power to rally people around him. In Galatians, Paul talks about the fruits of spirit which are not only virtues but reward.

This is a great segue to talk about the Spiritual Care Australia Conference that has taken much of my time this week. It was called “Reclaiming the Spirit” but as I listened to the speakers from Aboriginal scholars to psychologists, theologians to art therapists, it became annoyingly clear that, call it what we will, what we *needed* was to find ways for the Spirit to reclaim us.

On top of some of the research findings from conference scholars, Rev Andrew Smith shared some of the NCLS statistics in the Presbytery newsletter. So, I’m going to share with you a little of what I’ve learned. At some stage, hopefully I will return to these 2 important readings.

But first, I will start with Andrew’s warnings about what we think we know and what really is...

I’ve just returned from the USA so the following results do not surprise me.

Here are some US examples of the difference between perception and reality. Those surveyed thought that 27% of Americans are Muslim. However, research shows that it is just 1%. Those surveyed estimated that 29% of Americans were Asian-Americans. In fact, it is 6%. In these examples there is a clear difference between perception and reality. Never-the-less, the young man who went to Buffalo, NY to kill as many blacks as possible, believed that there was an African American conspiracy, an organised plot, to replace all white people in the USA. I looked it up. The American census tells me that in NY State, there is only a little over 13% African American residents. That includes NY City.

So, here’s the thing, people say that the world is becoming secular but in fact, the NCLS, the research of the Fetzer institute in the US and the most recent research of Spiritual Health Association¹ – all tell us something different. In fact, the world is becoming more spiritual.

¹ Before the pandemic hit, the Fetzer Institute commissioned a study with the goal of understanding the nuances of spirituality and religion in the United States. The Spiritual Health Association conducted a similar survey to find out how spirituality is understood and practiced in Australia. These studies aimed to learn more

One of the questions asked in the NCL survey was “Within the last five years, have you ever gone to a Christian church and been open to getting involved, but decided not to get involved?”. The responses:

- Two in ten have tried to lean in to get involved and then decided against it.
- For young adults (18-34) it is even higher – three in ten.

Young adults are searching for connection. 3 in 10 adults *tried* to get in the door but it didn’t work.

Spiritual Health Association’s research found that over 50% of people surveyed wanted a visit from a pastoral/spiritual care person. That was a sample of around 2000 people.

The NCLS also found:

- More than half of Australians believe in God or higher power (55%). In the US this figure was over 65%.
- More than half (56%) of Australians say they are familiar with the Christian faith. 44% have limited, little or no familiarity.

But there was some shocking news as well:

- Only half of all Australians understand Jesus to be a real person who actually lived. Two in ten say he is a mythical or fictional character. Three in ten say they don’t know.

I suggested this in a sermon last year about the way the Sunday school stories were told did not help children make the leap between Jesus as a magical figure and Jesus real and divine. ...and I had fairy tale books up on the altar along with sacred texts. I had suggested to some he was no more real than the Easter bunny. Sadly, I upset a few people whose lived experience was that *everyone* knows that Jesus was real. The difference between perception and real data is once again, in conflict.

What the NCLS tells us is that we have to find ways to tell the story to ‘non-church people in such a way that it makes connection.

Both the Fetzer and the SHA surveys showed spirituality to be very real to people – but not necessarily connected to a religion. What I mean to say is that some religious people are not spiritual and yet, most non-religious people are.

about the beliefs, behaviours, and motivations that undergird people’s spiritual and religious identification, and uncover a new story about our spiritual wellsprings and the greater spiritual good.

They may, or may not, identify with a faith group but they are deeply aware of a greater universe, a greater power than themselves, and it was essential to their well-being and identity. In fact, we are nearly entering a post-secular period.

We've seen this demonstrated in the spontaneous rituals and altars created after a tragedy.

The research was fascinating. One of the most surprising outcomes in the US data was on a scale of 'how spiritual are you?' – people who identified as deeply spiritual exhibited the most pro-social behaviour. That is, they were compelled to volunteer, be involved in community, help others and participate in civil society.

And that's a very good place to go back to our reading from Paul.

Freedom is a word most misunderstood. We saw this in the 'freedom' rallies during lock down. What exactly were they protesting against? Caring for other people? Thinking outside themselves?

It was a big theme in the last election from the United Australia Party – There was plenty of signage and face book messages simply saying 'freedom' yet I failed to find a manifesto that explained what they were offering.

NY State had a gun law just the same as Australia. You had to make a case as to why you needed to carry a handgun in a public place in order to get a license. For instance, if you were a diamond courier or armoured car driver, you might need to be armed. The American Supreme Court shot down the NY law last week with the statement that "Americans have the right to carry handguns anywhere in order to protect themselves."

I assume that is to protect themselves from people who have the freedom to carry handguns to the supermarket, primary schools and the cinema.

It's a perversion of freedom as something that pertains only to an individual. The Constitution's 'right to bear arms' was designed to raise a civil army to protect the country – it was never about individual protection.

Freedom in Christ must not be confused with irresponsible license either. It is a freedom grounded *in* Christ and it therefore carries obligations *to* Christ and *to* others. "Through love, we become slaves to each other."(v13)

“Paul understands that all humans are free in some sense and enslaved in another sense. The question is from what or whom are they free and to what or whom are they enslaved?”²

It is also often misunderstood that Paul was talking about freedom from the law in order to “live by the spirit”. I don’t mean the law of the land. He was talking about freedom from enslavement to Jewish religious law. Freedom to eat what has been given to you or to touch gentiles. In other words, freedom from the restrictions that keep you from caring for others as the spirit tells you.

People can be enslaved to rituals but they can also use them like a blanket that allows them to be self-absorbed, self-congratulatory and to be honest, sometimes just plain selfish. I remember meeting a woman from an Orthodox Jewish Sect I had never heard of – a fairly obscure group. The first thing she said to me is, “I’m religious but not spiritual”. She then outlined the practice of the sect which was all about ritual and rules and I didn’t hear anything about engagement with God or others. In the course of the conference, everyone she met found her rude. She talked down to people. She was first in the line for tea. It was all about her and her needs and opinions. This was a theological conference. It was fascinating to watch as people struggled to be kind...and she didn’t notice.

In contrast, the fruit of the spirit is love. Aboriginal scholar and Anglican priest, Glenn Laughfry, said his father taught him about deep listening. Deep listening takes in the whole of the universe, not just the universe within yourself. Listening underneath the noise. What is life-giving? Listen to the silence under the noise. The land is speaking.

In Paul’s universe, the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. These are not just behaviours – but also rewards. Interestingly, all these things take time – you have to slow down to be kind, or patient or have self-control. You have to stop before you speak. Glenn told us that his father kept telling him, ‘don’t make dust’...and he didn’t really understand.

His dad would send him out to bring in the sheep and then meet him at the gate and ask, ‘have you somewhere you have to be?’ What he was saying was if you do it slowly, you can see the condition of each lamb. You can ascertain how the weather is changing. You can see how the soils and grass are

² Cosare, Gavinta et al, *Texts for preaching*, Year C, p407

responding to grazing and drought. You can listen deeply to the birds and the bees and the trees and hear the health of the land.

These are things outside the 'law'. Living with the Spirit has certain recognisable characteristics but not a lot of rules. That alone can drive some people crazy. Just *tell* me how to do it?

To live in Christ is to live in the Spirit, the gift of Christ. Behind this idea is the radical insight that those who belong to Jesus belong to Him completely and can no longer belong to the law – or sin.

So there you have it. Statistics are telling us that our souls are tired of repression. The fear of expressing ourselves publicly about our spirituality is chafing under the secular sun. To come out as a spiritual person was seen as downright un-Australian...but there is a growing population crying to break through. It is a population fascinated by connection. Our challenge will be how do we offer safe spaces for this expression. Don't make dust – dust is the reality we can see – like stats. It is the data that challenges our perception based on our inner world.

I promised Beryl I would finish with a poem. This is one that was born from the conference.

Hanging by a thread

Sometimes my spirit
hangs by a thread
and just when I think
I might drop like a spider
into an alien world
I am captivated by the gossamer string
So fine
and so strong
so wonderful
that it can hold me.

J Shannon 22 June 2022