

Sunday 8th July, 2018
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

2 Samuel 5:1-5,9-10
Psalm 48
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

There was a great kids movie released by Disney a few years ago now. It was called “Inside Out”, and it followed the life of a young girl whose whole world was turned upside down when her parents moved from their idyllic mid-western home to the big city of San Francisco. The real stars of the movie are the animated emotions of this young girl, who all compete with each other to make themselves heard inside her head. And while I’m not sure that I’ve ever gone so far as to name these voices inside my own head I can certainly relate to the thrust of the story here.

Because there are lots of voices in our lives, aren’t there? I mean the chatter that goes on inside each one of us, the voice that says “you can’t do that”, or “you’re no good”, or even “how can you possibly believe this Christianity stuff”?

I know that in my own life there have been many times when I have had to fight to silence those voices - because the risk is that if we listen to them, we can be defined by them; that if we pay them too much attention, then we start to believe that we are no good, that we can’t do this or that, or that everything is just hopeless.

And it’s not just the internal voices, either - there is always the danger that other people’s opinions of us can begin to influence us - and isn’t it incredible how even people who we may call friends can say some hurtful, negative things; opinions which we can easily believe. As we search to be at peace with ourselves, what defines us... what decides whether we have fulfilled our potential... whether we really matter?

Is it achievement... success... status... appearance? And perhaps more importantly, *who* defines us? Which voices do we listen to?

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus faces his own voices of opinion - he returns to his home town with a reputation as a teacher and healer, but the locals are unimpressed. "Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James..." While the rejection is clear, we sometimes miss the sting in these words. 'Carpenter' is not the honourable profession taught to us at Sunday School, but rather village odd-job man... a low status occupation held by a family that's lost its land or trade... the bottom of the barrel.

And 'son of Mary' also carries a sneer. Even if his father were dead, Jesus should still be 'son of Joseph'. It's a slur on his parentage, perhaps carrying lingering scandal about an improper conception. It's village prejudice and gossip that adds up to, 'We're not impressed, because we know you're a nobody - you come from nothing and you'll end up as nothing.' That's how Jesus' home town would define him... as rubbish. And if Jesus had lived out of their definition then his whole ministry would have died this very day. But he doesn't... for he's listening to a different voice... and instead as the following verses (6b-13) describe, the movement flourishes.

I'm noting an increasing tendency within the Australian Church to do something similar. When we gather together, we tell each other success stories - the new people we're converting, the wonderful new programs we're running etc etc. It's as if we've decided that successful outcomes... big achievements... money, numbers, power and influence...is what defines us as a church. These are apparently the indicators that will tell us whether we are being a good and healthy church. Now whose voice is this that we're listening to? And is it true?

We also receive a vintage slab of Paul today. The context is that Paul finds himself in the middle of a high-stakes boasting competition as to 'who is the best apostle' defined by the criteria 'who's had the most impressive spiritual experience.' Hence this strange story of 'someone' - told in the third person, but really Paul himself - having actually visited Paradise itself!

But Paul makes a choice not to compete on these terms... not to be defined by this criterion. "I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.' Why? Why boast about that which most of us would prefer to hide and ignore? Paul believed that it is in our experience of weakness... of failure... even of sin... that we are made aware of our total reliance on God's love. Whereas in strength... success... superficial perfection... we think we have no need for God. This is what Jesus himself taught - we don't find God in pride, righteousness or status, but rather in poverty, lowliness, and failure. It's in the honest acknowledgement of weakness that we open ourselves and allow God's grace to work. Because in this experience of weakness, Paul hears God's voice saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (10)

We live in a culture increasingly obsessed with approval... with success, appearance and popularity. Christian wisdom says that focusing there, allowing those voices to define your life, is a dead-end road. We do far better to focus on the places where we are weak and wounded. For although these places can be scary and painful, this is where we are more likely to encounter the invitation and the grace of God. We do this not in a sense of self-hatred or disgust... for we need to be careful not to slip into a lifestyle of depressed victim-hood. But rather in a spirit of prayerful attentiveness, built on a calm acceptance of honest reality.

So how might we practice this intentional listening? Firstly, I think we need to be very aware of the cultural voices wanting to measure us by success, status. And to learn to respond intentionally as often as we hear them, 'No, I choose not to be defined by you.' I am also, personally, very careful about how much credence I give to the

negative voices of other people... those voices that write me off saying 'You're a failure... a loser etc.' Experience warns there is little truth here.

Instead I practice careful attention to my own life. There is no shortage of experience and information to tell me where my weak and wounded places are.

Before God I try to be as honest as I can bear... and in God's love, to be as accepting as my faith allows. To calmly say, 'Yes, I recognise this is the truth of my life. Now... what healing and change is God inviting me to here.' Then to try as much as possible to cooperate with the work of grace in this place of weakness. For those like me who can easily be overwhelmed by the awareness of our failings, hold this piece of scripture close. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." We are not overcome, for our faith says that here, in this very place where we feel most inadequate, here is the place that God's transforming grace is most powerful. You see, at the end of it all, there is only one voice that defines us... and that is God's. There is only one criterion that judges us... and that is God's love... God's grace.

Imagine the marketplace gossip in the village of Nazareth when news arrives that Jesus has been executed. 'See, I told you he was rubbish and nothing good could come of him.' They were so sure they were right, that they had the final word on Jesus, and his death would have seemed complete vindication of their prejudice. But they never saw him as God saw him.

And thankfully for our sake Jesus refused to be defined by them, or by the Temple, or by the Romans, or by greed or status... he allowed himself to be defined only by God. And history looks back at Jesus death, and sees... not failure, but the most incredible triumph of all time. So... which voices are we allowing to define our life? And where are we looking for our healing and joy?

In the name of God. Amen