
Blue Sunday 7/12/08

Isaiah 40 1 – 31

Psalm 20

Matthew 11 28 – 29

A woman approached me at the mall, pointed accusingly and said “You are **that** journalist aren’t you?” I wanted to say: If you have complaints, definitely not; if you have compliments, perhaps.

In terms of this service I am ‘that person’ to whom complaints **and** compliments can be addressed.

Idea is taken from ‘Blue Xmas’ celebrated in many countries, including USA and Canada.

Do not want to say a lot as words of liturgy and symbolism of actions speak eloquently.

Many reasons why suggested this, including most obvious, that this church community and wider Hilton community have suffered many losses this year.

Also, as a society and a culture, we don’t ‘do’ loss and grief well. I am envious of other cultures which have rituals associated with loss like Jews who sit Shiva; Africans who sit with a candle burning, folded set of clothes and blanket while visitors come to give condolences, pray and bring contributions to funeral.

Perhaps we have lost or never had more adequate mourning rituals because we are a success orientated culture and loss and grief are not marks of achievement or success. Perhaps also because we are largely uncomfortable with public displays of emotion, unlike Mediterranean cultures where stormy rows and extravagant mourning are acceptable, if not expected.

So, I felt it important to make space at this time of international jollification to recognize losses people have suffered, pause for at least a mo’ of mourning.

What of deeper reasons? Catholic theologian Richard Rollhauser said “Significant change is seldom willed.” i.e. we seldom choose major, momentous, life-changing change. Loss is one of those kinds of change. On widely-used scale of life stressors, significant that all top items are about loss: loss of a partner or parent, divorce, loss of employment and relocation.

Losing someone or something important changes us.

Part of purpose of rituals of grieving is to serve as a rite of passage to signify to surrounding community our change in status: becoming a widow/er, losing a parent or child.

Another purpose is to give us time to reflect on what we experience in loss and how it affects us. Time is one of things in short supply in our frenetic culture, perhaps also why we have lost art of grieving – everyone is in a hurry to make it better, get better and move on with life.

Though we may not choose it, we can choose how we respond to the experience of loss. We may resist it and risk becoming angry and bitter or embrace it, painful as it is and not only survive but also become stronger, more resilient and perhaps more compassionate. I was struck by article in Monday's paper about book called *This I believe II* collection of essays based on radio show about deepest beliefs of a wide range of 'ordinary' people in US. [Quote says people recognize good to be gleaned from life experiences, even trauma, by those willing to see it and many had deeply-held beliefs forged in suffering.]

Significant too, that many people, including in this congregation, have either come to faith or to deeper faith relationship with God through the experience of life trauma like loss and grief. These kinds of experiences interrupt the normal flow of life and give us a chance to re-evaluate our lives.

So, is there any good news in all of this?

Yes there is, for we are not alone in our loss and grief. Another purpose of rituals of loss and mourning is to allow others to come along side us, support us and be in solidarity with us. Many people can tell stories of the kindness they have received from others when they have suffered trauma and how much it means.

Nic had a Jewish friend who was very dismissive of our Anglo Saxon custom of sending flowers to bereaved people. "After all you can't eat flowers" she used to say. Jewish approach to condolences is far more practical – they take food to the bereaved who have to literally sit at home for a week and not do anything but grieve and reflect.

And where is God in all of this?

That's probably what the people of Israel asked themselves during time reading from Isaiah Ch 40 refers to. Book written during time of divided kingdom Israel northern kingdom and Judah southern kingdom. There seems to be a clear separation between first 39 chapters of this book and chs 40 to 66. First called book of Judgment, written during prophet's ministry, so late 8th and early 7th century BC. Second part called Book of Comfort written Isaiah's later years lived till about 681 BC, prophet projects self into future in sense addresses himself to Judah in exile in Babylon in 6th century, a generation as yet unborn at time he wrote, but generation that will suffer consequence of

their ancestors' sin. Jerusalem fell in 586 and exiles eventually returned in 538.

So Ch 40 set against a backdrop of profound loss for Judah – loss of homes, holy city of Jerusalem and way of life. But as one commentator puts it “liberation is in the air” in Ch 40 as prophet offers comfort and reassurance to Israelites that God is still God, **their** God, despite circumstances of exile, God will indeed rescue them as he had before, during exile in Egypt and will deliver them again, deliverance that prefigures greater deliverance of salvation from sin through Christ. In readings at Xmas time may hear again ringing words from v 3-5.

Verse 12 – 31 of Ch 40 are reminiscent of wonderful poetry of Job when God rebukes Job for his small ideas about God and his flagging faith [read v 13, 14].

The inference to be made from is not that God is too great to care, but too great to fail.

For Judah that meant reassurance that God would not fail to bring about their return from exile and restoration.

For us I'd like to suggest it means reassurance of comfort and hope in loss and grief. The comfort of God's presence with us in our suffering and the comfort of knowing that in his sojourn on earth as a man, God in Christ knew and experienced grief and suffering.

And hope? Well, hope of seeing loved ones again on other side of death which many bereaved people say is a great comfort. Hope that we will survive and be restored; changed by our experience of loss, certainly, but restored to equilibrium, to 'functioning mode' and hope that we will have restored to us the capacity for joy and enjoyment of life.

Significant that verse 31 phrase 'renew strength' contains suggestion of 'changing' strength as one would change clothes. As Isaiah says Ch 61 we trust in God that the time will come when we will 'take off the garments of mourning and put on the cloak of praise.'

I want to end with wonderful encouraging words of v 28 – 31...