

IN SEARCH OF RADIANT LIFE

[11TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR; 1 KINGS 19:1-8, PSALM 42, GALATIANS 2:15-21, LUKE 7:36-8:3]

“Many Christians find life disappointing. They are haunted by the feeling that it ought to be inwardly satisfying and outwardly radiant. But nothing deeply satisfies them for long. However, few are willing to admit that religion has never come alive for them and loyalty more than conviction keeps them linked with the church at all.” So said William Sangster over 50 years ago. This syndrome of a dull Christian experience and extreme reluctance to admit it still haunts the church today. So... what is the secret to radiant life?

Allow me to tell you about a friend I know who has a wonderfully generous and radiant personality. Were you to meet her, you may be tempted to think she has an idyllic life. Perhaps she is a high earning businesswoman. Perhaps she has a perfect family life, loving husband and successful children. Perhaps she is just one of those people, annoyingly, blessed with robust health and natural fitness. These are often the explanations we give and expectations we have of those who seem to have a mastery of life. However, were you to get to know her, a different picture would emerge. What little money she does earn goes toward paying for others. Though she longs for a family she has neither husband nor children. As to her physical health, she lives with epilepsy and currently battles cancer. To explain her fine quality of life one must look beyond her circumstances to a true and living faith.

At some stage we all experience a period of sadness, trial, loss, frustration or failure that is so disturbing and long lasting that it can be called a dark night of the soul. You may be in the middle of one now; a difficult marriage, a child in trouble, grieving a loved one, betrayal by a business partner or lover, or going through a divorce. How should we deal with our dark nights of the soul, our times of despair and seasons of depression, so that they don't rob us of that radiant life that is so appealing and yet so elusive? Let us turn to the scripture readings for the day as we reflect on these issues and allow the scriptures to guide our thoughts.

I find the story of Elijah most fascinating. This is a man who has been fed by ravens, observed a jug of oil never run dry, he himself had been used by God to raise a widow's son from death, he had witnessed a water-drenched sacrifice supernaturally set ablaze and watched as God ended a drought. Yet one messenger from Jezebel sends him scampering into the wilderness. There, in the depths of depression he wants his life to end. This is a man who has seen God do some extraordinary and amazing things! When our faith is at its lowest ebb, it is tempting to think that if only God would manifest himself in our lives in some amazing way it would all be ok. Elijah's experience strongly contradicts this, for if we read further, it is only later in the 'brief sound of silence' that Elijah truly experiences the presence of God. Often the true miracle of God's presence with us is right under our noses when we are prepared to listen to the silence.

The Psalmist, probably David during one of his periods in exile, is certainly enduring a dark night of the soul. Repeatedly, he asks; "Why are you so full of heaviness my soul, and why so unquiet within me?" It seems as though isolation is one of the chief causes of the psalmist's melancholy. He reminisces how he would worship together with the multitude. Being part of a worshipping community, sticking it out at a church long enough to make good friends, soul friends, is such a powerful ally during our dark nights of the soul.

Nevertheless, we like the psalmist, may sometimes feel we lack true friends when our need is most acute! Sometimes it seems as though we are surrounded by enemies. At such times we would do well to follow the example of the psalmist who wrote down his anguished prayer to God. Pouring our thoughts onto paper, or journaling, can offer us new perspectives on ourselves and deep insight into our situations.

The epistle brings to light one of the greatest controversies of the early Church. Should non-Jewish Christians be forced to follow Jewish laws? The Jewish laws were extensive and Paul describes them as a great burden for the gentile believers in Christ. Paul, with his insistence on the Gospel of grace spoke out vehemently against placing the burden of the law on gentile believers. Paul saw with clarity of thought that not even Peter was able to distinguish. I suspect that it was no coincidence that Jesus chose Paul, a well educated Rabbi, to be his apostle to the gentiles. Study ought to be an important part of every Christian's lifestyle. As we deepen our understanding of God through reading Christian books and studying

the scriptures we may be liberated from many burdens that we bear needlessly.

How should we relate to the scandalous story of the woman who throws herself at the feet of Jesus, thereby totally disregarding society's polite conventions. What drove this woman to so boldly seek out Jesus? What deprivations and scorn had she suffered? Her profession, one assumes, had left her with a sense of guilt. We are told by Luke that she is a sinner; it is her need for the forgiveness that Jesus offers that drives her. The secret to radiant life is not found within ourselves. As CS Lewis has said, "we are a bundle of self-centered fears, hopes, greeds, jealousies and self-conceit all doomed to death." It is only when we, like the woman in the story, throw ourselves at Christ's feet acknowledge our sin and need for forgiveness that healing takes place. We must receive, truly receive, the forgiveness of God before we are able to love and so live radiantly!

All these practical suggestions can be helpful: Listening to the silence, being part of a worshipping community, journaling, renewing our minds and receiving God's forgiveness are all aspects that can help us to overcome our dark night of the soul. But is our dark night of the soul simply something to overcome, something that must end at all costs. Or is it perhaps a 'gift', something to refine our characters, penetrate our veneer of social acceptability and deepen our spirituality that we may indeed live a radiant life in the very midst of great trial. Allow me to conclude with the words of an unknown author:

"When God wants to drill a man and thrill a man and skill a man, when God wants to mould a man to play the noblest part. When he yearns with all his heart to create so great and bold a man, that the world might be amazed, watch His methods, watch His ways. How He ruthlessly perfects whom He royally elects. How He hammers and hurts him and with mighty blows converts him into trial shapes of clay that only God understands, while his tortured heart is crying and he lifts beseeching hands. How he bends but never breaks when His good he undertakes, how he uses whom he chooses and with every purpose fuses him and with mighty acts induces him to try his splendour out, God knows what He's about!"