

Susannah's Sermon – 21 March 2010

Several years ago, Seth Biderman and Christian Cassilas helped found a group that started a project to involve teenagers in organic agriculture and renewable energy in a village in New Mexico, United States. Much of the inspiration came from reading, *Gaviotas: A Village to Reinvent the world*, by Alan Weisman. This book tells the true story of Paolo Lugari and a remarkable group of Scientists, Students, Guahibo Indians and cowhands, who have succeeded in creating a sustainable community in what they describe as “The Barren soils, shifting politics, and sporadic violence of Colombia’s Eastern Savannahs”.

Biderman and Casillas operated the New Mexico project for two summers. When they were unable to find more funding, it was discontinued and the colleagues went their separate ways. Five years later they had an opportunity to visit Gaviotas, and they write about the experience in *Yes Magazine*.

The night before their visit, Paolo Lugari told them to expect the unexpected. “In Gaviotas”, he said, “one lives in a state of perpetual surprise.”

“But nothing prepared us for the sight of 20,000 acres of dark green trees bursting impossibly from the acidic Savannah soils”, they write. They toured in a broken down minibus, towed by a tractor that ran on biofuels produced in the village. In the forest, they learned how the Gaviotans “mimic nature”, as they put it, by keeping the forest diverse. Between every ten pines are interspersed their new fuel crop — African palms — along with fruit trees and native plants.

In the community kitchen, hundreds of meals are produced daily, using an energy efficient stove that burns wood thinned from the forest. Water in the bathroom is hot, thanks to a rooftop solar water heater they manufactured themselves. The economic heart of Gaviotas is in its Pine-resin processing and packaging

factory, which generates nearly 80% of the community's revenue.

Biderman and Casillas, looking for some lessons they could apply back in New Mexico, found their clue in an exchange between Lugari and the foreman of a project to use by-products from the resin processing to pave muddy roads. When the foreman gave an inconclusive report, Lugari said, "Excellent, we'll proceed A.V.V. ". Asked about A.V.V., Lugari explained, "Alli vamos viendo... We'll see what happens as we go along".

Every where they looked, they saw examples of how Gaviotians had encountered obstacles, had taken a step back, and then "surprised" themselves by discovering ways to adapt. Biderman and Casillas saw that success came not as a result of brilliant planning, but from trial and error, with plenty of wrong turns along the way.

Dr. Jorge Zapp, the scientist who served as unofficial technical director of the Gaviotas project in the 1970's and 1980's said the real lessons of Gaviotas aren't about technology. "What was spread in large part", he said, "was that people learned to believe in their own abilities ... development means renewing one's faith in the collective intelligence of humans." (Seasons of the spirit, Spirit sightings).

When have you created something positive by working together with other people in your community?

We read in Isaiah 43, "Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honour me; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed of myself (reminiscent of Genesis) so that they might declare my" ... (Is. 43: 19-21). Do you hear parallels between this and the Galviatos story? A new thing is happening ... life in the desert ... hope.

The second part of Isaiah speaks of the impending return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon — this will be the new exodus — the “former thing” and the “things of old” hark back to the first exodus from Egypt.

This is now replaced by a “new thing”, the return from exile. In this new event, the events of the first exodus are repeated, ‘I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert’.

Zoom forward to Christian biblical theology, using the same imagery ...

The “new things” are now Jesus’ death and resurrection and the ‘drink’ that God provides for God’s people is the sacrament of the new covenant. (Reginald Fuller, Practicing the ???)

‘Drink this in remembrance of me’... the psalmist (Ps. 126: 1 – 6) proclaims, ‘he that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him’.

Change is in the air

Something is happening

‘do you not perceive it?’ (Is: 43)

6 days before the Passover, 6 days before the last supper, Jesus had a meal with his friends. Despite warnings, despite mutterings, he was heading for Jerusalem for the Festival. He is almost there for a new Exodus.

The authorities want to kill him and Lazarus — destroy the evidence.

Tonight he is having a meal with friends. Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Peter, Judas ... his friends.

Mary, in a prophetic act, deeply moved by all that has happened and all that might happen...

Mary the quiet listener. Who sits at his feet, Breaks open the nard

The fragrance fills the house...

Not the feared stink of Lazarus in the tomb, but the fragrance of sweet perfume, strong, alive.

She kneels down and anoints his feet, wiping them with her hair, as you would a corpse — anointing them with nard.

Eyes only for him, filled with love and tears.

He too is moved.

Then, the love they have created is shattered by mumbling, angry mumbling,

“How dare she! It should have been sold to help the poor!”

Such love would never neglect the poor. Lazarus, what’s got into you? Well may you ask...

“Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial (Jn 12: 7)

You’ll always have the poor

But not always have me...

Something new is happening. Think about when you have experienced a small act of kindness that helped you keep going...

Smell the perfume, feel the hands, the touch, see her eyes... how can you encourage someone you know to keep going?

This week I have been tied up in a novel, reading much later at night than is good for me. The novel which I finished reading on Friday morning is “The Message” by Marcus Zusak. It is narrated in the first person, by Ed Kennedy, a very ordinary guy, who happens to become a hero during a bank robbery. He describes himself thus:p.15, Following the bank robbery his life changes, and he is presented with a series of challenges delivered to him each time, on a playing card. An Ace to be precise ... 4 aces, one after another.

During the process of facing these challenges he changes. He grows in confidence and integrity... and at the end he learns ...
p 381-382:

then says of himself..."I'm not the messenger at all, I'm the message !"

Something new...imagine that.