

Commissioning Holy Covenant Jamison

Nikolai Blaskow

There are three questions that have preoccupied me all of my life: *Where do I come from? What am I? And where am I going?*

Like Gaugin's, they are questions that have been forged in the crucible of personal suffering. For Gaugin it was the death of his daughter Aline in 1897. For me it was the death of my mother, Therese Woelefell in 1946, at the age of 21.

They are questions that are at once personal, existential, and historical. And they concern us all in this room, regardless of whether we have suffered much or suffered little. They concern us as individuals and they impact upon us as a church, a community, a nation and as a human race on this oasis in the immense desert of Space, which we have come to call the Earth.

You may ask what have the questions to do with my vocation as a priest, as a writer and as someone being commissioned to pastoral ministry to this congregation? Let me put it to you this way:

Whereas before it wasn't so obvious, now it is:

even though I have lived three of my mother's life times, **I am officially, working against time**. And even more *now* than ever, I have to work with a purpose and focus, and make the time count.

And so, whether I am working at Canberra High assisting students with English and History and essay writing, or helping to promote the Inter-School Christian Fellowship club called *Chase*, or working with students at Canberra University, or ultimately whether I am writing film or drama or poetry or prose, or whether I am film making, or praying and working

pastorally in this parish, for me, the questions will always be the same. *Where do I come from? What am I? And where am I going?*

Thomas Merton, that great contemplative and man of prayer, says that the questions about the Self are the most important ones that you can ask in life. Why? Because they take you to the heart of your vocation as a human being created in the image of God.

Merton observes, that all of our lives we are searching for our true Selves. And when we find that true Self, it becomes for us, the very door of God through which we enter into our union with God.

He remarks:

“This one door is the door of the Palace of Nowhere. It is the door of God. It is our very self, our true self, called by God to perfect union with himself. And it is through this door we secretly enter in, responding to the saving call to ‘Come with me to the Palace of Nowhere, where all the many things are one.’”

For Merton **our whole life can be summed up as a search for the true person that is me**, and in finding myself, I find God. When I discover myself, I discover God. When I encounter my true self, I come face to face with God.

And so, here I am standing before you, the community which I will serve, turning my eyes to the world into which I am called to bear witness to the reality of God in Jesus Christ, dedicating myself to this task of knowing myself, because, if I apply myself to it diligently, I will not only enter into union with my God, I will also bring you and others with me, by helping you to discover your true selves as well.

What for me has always been a principle of good teaching in my professional life to this point – to release the unique talent, the unique voice that lies within every student – has now taken on a whole new significance.

I must bring myself into a place of knowing my true identity in God, and in doing so, release the unique voice that God has kept in reserve for me, and as that voice sings and speaks and writes, and films, and as others hear me, and read me, it may be that they will hear the voice of the God who is there, and will discover in hearing it, the voice that resides in them and the uniqueness of the person they are called to be.

As I have discovered new things about my mother and my mother's family over these last two years through cousins, whom I never suspected I had, who had been looking for me these last 58 years, and found me through a sermon I preached right here at Holy Covenant entitled 'Crossing the Border', it has shaken me to the very core of my being, and caused me to re-define myself.

But this shaking has done more than that. It has taken me beyond myself, and given me a new vision of community: a community rising out of the experience of shakeness.

It is a term used in this way for the first time in Czechoslovakia by Jan Patočka who died in March 1977 for his beliefs under interrogation by the secret police. His Charter 77 movement brought together a diversity of people: Catholics, Protestants, atheists, agnostics, reform-minded ex-Communists, anarchists, social democrats, liberals and conservatives. The only thing uniting such a hotch potch of people was **a common desire and a common experience**: the common desire to discover the truth and the reality and the openness that is to be found beyond the life of lies, and the experience of the solidarity that comes with being shaken by the traumas and injustices of life.

Patocka's response to the experience of suffering in the world by a determined attempt to rethink his whole moral attitude to the world, as it is called into question by those experiences of suffering, appeals deeply to me, as does his call to reconstruct one's life accordingly.

In my daily meditation Diary I wrote this on Friday 22nd May:

I have a vision, that Holy Covenant should be host to an inclusive community of prayer and worship on a 24hour a day cycle, which would include intercessory prayer for the world and the Church, and that from this circle of prayer will emerge great projects of faith:

artistic, charitable, and liturgical.

And so I conclude.

As I walk through Merton's door of the Palace of Nowhere, where all the many things are one, I say to you my friends, using the words of my daughter Sarah's new single:

*All I want,
all I want,
all I want*

is to know myself.

I invite you to walk through that door with me.

Thank you.