

27 February 2011

Matthew 6:24-34

In Washington DC, at a Metro Station, on a cold January morning in 2007, a man with a violin played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, approximately 2,000 people went through the station, most of them on their way to work.

After about 3 minutes, a middle-aged man noticed that there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds, and then he hurried on to meet his schedule.

About 4 minutes later: The violinist received his first dollar. A woman threw money in the hat and, without stopping, continued to walk.

At 6 minutes: A young man leaned against the wall to listen to him, then looked at his watch and started to walk again.

At 10 minutes: A 3-year-old stopped, but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The kid stopped, but his mother tugged him along hurriedly. The kid stopped to look at the violinist again, but the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head the whole time. This action was repeated by several other children, but every parent — without exception — forced their children to move on quickly.

At 45 minutes: The musician played continuously. Only 6 people stopped and listened for a short while. About 20 gave money but continued to walk at their normal pace. The man collected a total of \$32.

After 1 hour: He finished playing and silence took over. No one noticed and no one applauded. There was no recognition at all.

No one knew this, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth 3.5 million dollars. Two days before, Joshua Bell sold out a theatre in Boston where the seats averaged \$100 each to sit and listen to him play the same music.

This is a true story. Joshua Bell played incognito in the DC Metro Station, was organised by the Washington Post as part of a social experiment about perception, taste and people's priorities.

This experiment raised several questions:

In the common-place environment, at an inappropriate hour, do we perceive beauty?

If so, do we stop and appreciate it?

Do we recognise talent in an unexpected context?

One possible conclusion reached from this experiment could be 'do not be anxious. Do not worry. Put God first.'

(After the Christchurch earthquake)

What does it mean to put God first? I suppose we have to start with who or what is God — The divine

The ground of our being

The meaning and focus of life
And much more?

Is God, the God of Jesus?

If so, much can be learned from Jesus' sayings and actions.

God is loving, compassionate, cares for the poor, feeds the hungry, visits sick and imprisoned, heals.

Jesus is one who came that we may have life in all its fullness (Jn 10:10).

So putting God first means making these things a priority. What would it mean at the metro station if we heard the violinist?

One of my clergy colleagues said recently that all of the major changes in his life have been initiated by God. God's got it all sorted, 'so why is it that I always try to take control?' he asked. Meister Eckhart (14th Century mystic) says 'Let go and let God be God in you'. Putting God first is first about being, then about doing.

Alan Cadwallader, New Testament Scholar, said he used to read Romans thinking we are justified by our faith — but now, with new scholarship, after a struggle, he knows we are justified by God's faith in us! God loves us, loves you, loves me, unconditionally.

How would it be to rest in that love? To allow myself to be soaked in it? To really let go of anxiety and worry and rushing? What would that look like? What would that feel like? Would we hear the music?

Jesus says, unless you become like little children, you cannot become part of God's way. I think there's something here about trust — complete trust in God.

I often waver. I trust, I let go, then I take it back, take back control, tense up, strive, work too hard, trust, relax ... it seems a bit of a cycle. 'Trust me. I love you' says God. Relax, let go, let me be.

Remember Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush in Exodus? God's name is 'I am', 'I will be', not 'I am doing' but 'I am becoming'. I am. Being itself. And the task Moses is commissioned with is freeing God's people, God's beloved ones.

The invitation today is to be; to relax in that freedom, to spend time opening our eyes, our ears, to discover the God who is in us, between us.

What would it take for you to 'Let go and let God be God in you'? What would it mean for your life to rest in 'I am-ness'?

From 'Mister God, This is Anna': 'This is the curious nature of Mister God, that even while he is at the centre of all things, he waits outside us and knocks to come in. It is me who opens the door.

Mister God doesn't break it down and come in: no, he knocks and waits.' A bit like beauty in the subway. Do we stop long enough to notice?

Sandy Ramage, NZ Anglican priest, writes 'When trouble overwhelms us it is instinctive to call out to God. It matters little what your theology is, or if you believe in God or not.

What matters is the ability and freedom to express powerlessness in the face of tragedy and ongoing uncertainty. It's like yelling to the universe "I have no hope. Help!"

Käthe Weingarten, an associate clinical professor in the Dept of Psychology at Harvard Medical School, distinguishes between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' hope.

'Hopelessness thrives', says Weingarten, 'when the future is known, certain and bleak. Expressing hopelessness in the midst of rolling earthquakes is normal, because hope requires ready access to the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which trauma and stress diminish. Somehow, enough quiet has to penetrate the limbic system to stem the chemical cascades that set off hyper-arousal and fear.'

Great cathedrals, their magnificent processions and choirs, come into their own at times of community chaos. They unfold rituals that promote stillness, and which suggest a way of holding the untenable, the overwhelming and the incomprehensible. This is their *raison d'être*.

This is why the people of Christchurch love their cathedral, even if they'd never dream of hanging out there. Sometimes, as we get on with coming to terms with our despair, it is enough to know that there's a place that has been prepared for people to sit in the mystery and hold a space as sacred.

Despite our best efforts, hope can remain elusive unless we downsize expectations. As Weingarten explains it, 'Reasonable hope is a smaller but more attainable version of the impossible dream.'

Unreasonable hope is when we think God will save Christchurch, or that anything is going to be the same again after thousands of quakes. Reasonable hope means we become realistic, sensible and moderate, directing our attention to what is within reach instead of what is desired but unattainable.

Bob Parker, Christchurch's mayor, is operating with reasonable hope when he acknowledges that more deaths are likely, that he is worried about his folks just like you may be, and that while life is so disrupted it's important to stay where you are, to care for yourself, your family and neighbours.

Be as still as possible in a quaking world, downsize expectations, narrow down geographically and take smaller steps while still giving of your best. In this way, says Weingarten, 'We practice reasonable hope, a profoundly creative process through which the future emerges.'

And for us at a distance to pray, to support financially and practically.

Can a woman forget the child of her womb? Yet even if she forgets I will never forget you, I have inscribed you on the palm of my hand.