

THE PURPOSE OF CHURCH

Exodus 24: 12-18; Matthew 17: 1-8

If you had to name the greatest writer of all time, who would you name? In the western world, at the top of many a list would be the name: Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy was a Russian novelist, a writer, a thinker and a man of incredible social influence. Tolstoy started writing in the mid 1800s and lived a long life well into the 20th century. His first two novels were: *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Both became massive best sellers and are still big sellers today. Both have also been made into films as well as theatre productions. Tolstoy's own life story has also been the subject of writing and film too.

But even more significant than his fame and success was something that happened to Tolstoy in mid life, something totally unexpected. Tolstoy was born upper class. He became a soldier and officer and distinguished himself with a reputation for bravery and leadership. He became a successful writer and a man of social influence. He married the love of his life and they had children. By mid life, Tolstoy was massively successful, healthy and strong, happily married, had children and lots of good friends and family. But then, something totally unexpected happened. He was away from home, travelling. And while trying to fall asleep one night, he describes how he was seized by a terrifying thought. If he was here today and gone tomorrow, what meaning and value would his life ultimately have? Sure people could talk about him and remember him, but he would be buried and gone. What are humans, he thought, if they're here today and gone tomorrow? What game are we humans playing just working and trying to make a mark in some way and then we're gone? People may remember us but we won't be alive to enjoy that. We're like mice in a cage running on a wheel. We can feel great about ourselves running faster than others. But we're still running the same circle and we all die.

Now, you would think such thoughts would come and go for Tolstoy. I mean, who here hasn't had terrifying thoughts at times, and especially in the middle of the night where they can catch us most unguarded? But usually such thoughts go away, no?

Well, for Tolstoy, such thoughts didn't go away. In fact, in his "confessions" he writes about seriously contemplating suicide, so haunted was he by the terrifying thoughts. Fear had wrapped itself around him and wouldn't let him go. At one point, though, there was a turning for him. Tolstoy decided he must somehow muster up the courage to engage his despair rather than suppress it or be defeated by it. He began a search, a desperate search, for a deeper foundation of meaning for his life, something larger that could engage his mortality, finitude and fear. He explored any wisdom and insight he could find through

science, philosophy and religion. But where religion was concerned, unfortunately, the only version there was around him was a Christianity that was a state and culture religion, like a social club. The church's values and society's values were the same. They were centred on rising up, succeeding, getting more of this and more of that, making your mark and then getting a pat on the back from those who counted. Having the added insurance of God on your side and heaven as your reward just sealed the deal. For those at the bottom, the church taught acquiescence and acceptance. You just accept the order of things, you obey the authorities because they've been ordained by God. Church was a social club teaching you to accept what is as it is, easing your conscience if you're in power and making you passive if you're at the bottom. Church was not a place for serious contemplation, questioning and searching for something more.

Now Tolstoy was not alone among the *intelligentsia* of Europe in being disillusioned with church. Secularization had begun among the educated classes from as early as the 1700s in Europe. Many saw through the façade of church and began to question traditional religion. What if God was made up? What if all that's real is us here and now? What if we have to make up our own meaning, not have it handed to us like little children, which is what state and church control of the masses was all about, treating people like children, threatening punishments or promising rewards according to how good or bad you were as those in power supported by the church decided.

But then you had some, beginning with thinkers and artists, who were seeking something a lot more genuine and real to make meaning of their lives. Autonomy alone with me deciding all the meaning there was outside the church, was not enough. I need some way into something larger, something more transcendent. But unfortunately, all the church did was tell you what you had to believe and if you didn't believe it or obey, you were damned. But what if I called the church's bluff? What if I saw behind the façade of church a construct that was purely human made, a construct meant to control people and keep them chained rather than opening their hearts and minds to exploration, seeking, questioning and a passion for something more?

Tolstoy went through his search for ten years without finding sufficient answers to satisfy the despair in his soul. But then, two things happened. First, he noticed how many peasants who were not upper class like him, who lacked the resources, social success and learning he had, lived with a certain simplicity, dignity and contentment he totally lacked. Second, he began reading the bible for himself and he discovered for the first time the words of Jesus as found in the gospels. Something began to open up in Tolstoy. But who could he talk about it with? Was there some group, some community where he could engage an honest and raw sharing of his journey, his inner struggle and this stirring of transcendent love through the words of Jesus? Where would such a journey take him?

OK, before continuing with more of Tolstoy's story, let's bring in our scripture readings. Today is Transfiguration Sunday. Transfiguration means change, meaningful change, big change. In biblical imagery such transfiguration is usually described using physical descriptors. There are mountains. With Moses, there is cloud and lightning like fire, and this is associated with the presence of God up close and personal. We're told that Moses was on the mountain 6 days before anything big happened, and on the 7th day he heard God speak. 7 is the number of completion. The world was created in 7 days. Every week is complete in 7 days. God rested on the 7th day and the Sabbath became a day to contemplate and recreate oneself in the presence of the divine. But once God speaks, a new journey begins. We're told that Moses was on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights. 40 is the number of struggle and discernment. Transfiguration may happen on the 7th day, but the meaning of it and the change it evokes is something that has to be worked out and lived out. It involves attention and devotion... and often struggle. 40 is the number of that journey of struggle and discernment. The real and meaningful changes in our lives don't just come with a snap of the fingers. It takes time to figure things out and find a clear path through our deepest feelings, fears and longings.

And the story of Moses on the mountain is the framework for the story of Jesus on the mountain the gospel writers tell. We're told that 6 days later Jesus took with him his closest disciples and went up the mountain on the 7th day. Rather than the lightening fire phenomenon being around Jesus, Jesus himself is transfigured. Jesus himself becomes dazzling white. The association is unmistakable. God's presence is not just around Jesus like it was around Moses, but **is** Jesus. Then, there are mysterious figures who appear, and they're identified as the spirits of Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets. There is a cloud here too, but instead of giving Jesus the Word of God on tablets of stone as Moses was given, Jesus himself speaks the Word of God. Jesus embodies the Word of God. And so, the divine voice declares: "This is my Son, the Beloved... listen to him!" The disciples are terrified! But Jesus tells them to get up and not be afraid. The 40 days Journey will begin and they must trust where it will take them. It took Tolstoy 10 years after his time of crisis began. How long would it take the disciples? How long will it take us?

What happened to the church that it forgot about the core fact that the gospel is about transfiguration? The gospel is about core life encounters, mountain top moments when life's meaning and purpose becomes clear and we are empowered to make a new journey with all the struggle and personal work that will involve. But for most of its history in the west, the church was drawn in by the power of the state and it became a state religion. And here in North America, even though church and state were separated, the church became a social club reflecting society's popular values and prejudices. If anyone was searching, questioning and longing for a deeper meaning and purpose that could shake up and redirect their lives and society as a whole, church was not that place. Anyone who was confronted by the limits of their lives in some way, those who came into personal crisis for any number of reasons,

those who were seeking a deeper meaning than just success, money, recognition, power and self-promotion, would find little in church to engage and direct them? Tolstoy would have been out of luck in North America just like he was in Russia.

But that what about now, in 2020? The fastest growing group in Canada are those who no longer identify with any organized religion. People no longer need the blessing of the church to build up their success and well-being out there in society. They no longer need the church to assure them they are good and worthy. There are better social clubs out there and better ways to affirm yourself than church if that's what you're after.

So, is there a purpose for the church anymore? If so, what? The purpose of the church is to become the kind of community of seeking and questioning, exploring and digging deep into ourselves, in search of ever deeper truth, justice and love. Church needs to be the kind of place and space where the Tolstoys of the world can come and engage their search for deeper meaning and purpose to life than just getting ahead. Church needs to be the kind of place and space where seekers can come and engage in a deeper search for wholeness than the promise of heaven after you die or comfort with minimum disruption to your lifestyle or commitments. Church needs to be a place and space where people find love in their hearts for themselves through outreach into the world around them. Like Jesus crucified, the pain out there in the world is taken in and transfigured through the power of love and our advocacy for justice through building a welcoming and inclusive community. Church has to be a place and space where mountaintop transcendence can be found in the company of others also on a spiritual journey, whether that journey is 40 days or 40 years.

That's what we want to build here at Armour Heights Church. That's what we are building here at Armour Heights church. Tolstoy had to build his own network of relationships and community based on the values of Jesus. There was no place for his kind of Christianity and his ideas in the church. Would Tolstoy find a home here and now, here at Armour Heights. Let's keep building the kind of community where the Tolstoys of the world can find a home. That's our future and that future has already begun. Do you see it? Do you feel it? Amen.