

CHANGE OUTSIDE & INSIDE

Matthew 21: 1-11

When the growing social restrictions began to happen a few weeks ago, I had remembered that years back I had read a novel by the great French writer and essayist Albert Camus. Besides being a Nobel Prize Laureate in literature, Camus was also part of a group of European thinkers called existentialists. Even though existentialism had roots in the 1900s, it really became popular in a more public way after the 2nd world war. People had experienced the devastation of war up close and personal on European soil. Hundreds of thousands had been killed. Hundreds of thousands had been displaced. The trauma was overwhelming. Existentialism was committed to examining life for what it was, outside abstractions, fantasies and illusions. It sought to examine life and death and the essence of what it was to be human - to be free, authentically free, free to choose without others determining who you have to be, free to find the courage to be oneself without pretense or illusion.

The novel by Camus I reread is called: *the Plague*. It is fictional, but also based on historical facts about how in a certain part of French Algeria, there had been recurrences of “the plague” in the form of cholera, which had spread throughout the population, killing many. One of the reasons I re-read the novel was that Camus examines, through his characters, what happens to people and to a society that is on lockdown with the borders sealed. How do you live in the face of fear and inevitable doom, seeking some light and hope, even as the future is uncertain? How do you grieve the dead but also work for the living? How do you find your authentic humanity when society has encouraged you to live fantasy and illusion in less urgent times? One of the things that happens to the population as fear grows is that people become more and more superstitious. Any hope in this or that magical cure or charms or beliefs goes way up. It's a hotbed for scammers as people are looking for quick fixes and hope wherever they can find it even if it's probably fake. Desperation combined with fear and feeling trapped makes us all victims, and our courage to face life in all it's difficult reality becomes a real challenge.

Well this is also, very much, the situation of the people at the time of Jesus. Even though they are not dealing with a Plague or Covid-19, the people are hemmed in by other social restrictions. The masses are exceedingly poor. They are under the rule of a foreign power. Their own leaders keep them chained by using guilt and fear over their destiny and the belief that God can only rescue them if they tow the line as the religious leaders lay it down. Any hope of breaking free, of changing their situation in any other way, is a pipe dream. And so, they are vulnerable, vulnerable to dream and to hope wherever they find it. The alternative to dreaming and hoping is fatalism. Might as well be dead then.

But here comes Jesus offering something different. So what is it that's different about Jesus? He's a healer. In a world before modern medicine, anyone with the gift of healing is a powerful person. And Jesus is clearly a gifted healer. But instead of seeking money or power for his healing, Jesus is seeking for people to open their hearts to an alternative vision for themselves and the nation as a whole. He's talking about healing the nation not just physically but spiritually. The people are soul sick. The spiritual remedy of the religious authorities is all about fuelling the fear and threat of outsiders and building up hate and animosity toward anyone who doesn't tow the line. They also use shaming along with blaming and they do this in a public way. All of it is intended to make people submissive. When people are down and out there's lots of negative energy that has to go somewhere. Shame, guilt and fear builds up the energy, and blame, hate and violence toward others is a great way to unleash it.

But here comes Jesus using his powers of healing to break down the negative energy through the therapy of compassion and forgiveness. By healing through love, bodies, minds and spirits are being released from the negative energy of fear and hate. And, contrary to the spiritual leaders of Israel, Jesus declares that his kind of healing love is what God is all about. The spiritual leaders have betrayed the people. They're using them and abusing them by imprisoning them with fear, shame and guilt.

OK, so what happens? Who wins the people over? Is it love or is it fear and hate?

Well, the story of Palm Sunday is about Jesus entering Jerusalem during the most important religious festival of the people: The Passover. The Passover is all about the liberation of people from their ancient enemy – Egypt. Who is their enemy now? According to the authorities, it is Rome. In order to defeat Rome, they need God behind them. The only way to get God activated on their behalf is by observing religious law more faithfully. And when God comes to save them, God will do so through a messiah/saviour. This saviour will be like their ancient king David, a mighty warrior who will unite all the people and their leaders behind a campaign to crush their enemies.

Jesus, of course, has been trying to inspire the people with a different vision for the nation. Jesus is a healer and a lover and the salvation he's come to bring is about the people learning to forgive one another, overcome the barriers of class and race, build bridges rather than walls with their enemies, and offer an open hand rather than a closed fist.

Even though this is not what people have envisioned the messiah to be and even though the authorities have been pumping the people with a different vision fueled by the fear, shame, hate and blame, the people want to believe in Jesus. And they do believe in Jesus in a way. They welcome him into the city like he's a king. They cheer and wave palm branches. But we

know what's going to happen, don't we. We know how the story ends. By the end of the week the people will have turned on Jesus or abandoned him because he has not met their expectations for a messiah they want. They want a messiah of miracles and quick fixes. 'Heal me Jesus, and heal us as a nation. Do some magic. We don't want to have to take on responsibility for healing our world, each other and ourselves. You do it for us.' They want a messiah who will destroy their enemies, because the problem is out there. Don't ask us to change anything in ourselves, Jesus. The problem is always someone else. If only everybody else smartens up the world will be great. As long as we have our power back, we'll make everything right and the world will be a happy place. As long as we're in charge, the right people will have the power and the wrong people will get what they deserve.

'Give us miracles, money and power, dear Jesus, but don't ask us to change according to this pipe dream of love for the world starting with us loving each other. We don't want to have to do anything or give anything up for someone else. Don't ask us to change our lives, our life styles, our routines, the things we want to do when we want to do them.

And this, my friends is not just about the people in Jesus' day. It's about us too. Our enemy right now is not Egypt or Rome. It is not even Covid-19 in and of itself. It is what Covid-19 can do to us that's the real threat. If we want to really hear what Jesus is saying, it's not about any quick fix of dealing with the illness and then going back to the way life was before. No. If we are going to really hear what Jesus is saying, we have to be prepared to be changed by his love and then we have to take responsibility for our world in the name of that love. If we are going to be changed by Jesus' love, we're going to have to take responsibility for the welfare of our neighbour. Instead of blaming and shaming others it's about creating bridges of understanding and friendship. Instead of neglecting others and this planet by our lifestyles, it's about taking responsibility to care for the world around us beginning with some personal changes in what we do and how we live.

OK, you may be thinking, it's all so overwhelming. Where do we begin? It all feels so abstract and distant. How do I make a difference? We get empowered as human beings when we make one or two meaningful changes in our lives at a time. I'm sure anyone of us can think of one or two things we can do, toward the health of our planet and the care of life on it. Who's around us? What person or organization needs some care? What in my personal lifestyle contributes to the killing of our planet? Can I change one thing there, maybe eliminate some of my carbon footprint, be a little more attentive what I buy and how I dispose of things and the impact that has on our planet? Can I get a little more focussed spiritually, mentally or physically toward more meaningful healing and wholeness? What should I give up? What should I take on in a more committed way? There's an answer to every one of these questions...

In Camus' novel, the plague is eventually overcome. A lot of people have died. Many survivors have been changed. Some have lost their faith; others have found it. But those who are the real heroes are not those who have made great splashes in the papers and the news for what they've done to fight the battle. Rather, in small every-day ways they have cared for people, absorbed the fear, the pain and the grief around them; and they've kept searching for ever deeper meaning to build their lives going forward. In times of extremity, it has to be real and authentic or it has to be discarded. Illusions of quick fixes, blaming, shaming and judging outward, or escape into a private world of pleasure and oblivion are no longer options for those who want to live whole lives. Jesus came with a message of love that would change everything if people were prepared to begin changing themselves. Unless each of us takes this on, we cannot discover the authentic humanity God gave us to fulfill.

Let us pray: Dear God, find us, each and every one of us in this season of Covid-19... Don't let us settle for being the same again... Don't let us find peace in just going back to the way things were. Inspire us, provoke us, disrupt us with some clarity and new passion to do something new, change something, connect, commit and engage... In Jesus' name... Amen.