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Reflection

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They Left Everything and Followed Him

Readings: Isaiah 6:1 -8, I Corinthians 15: 1-11; Luke 5: 1- 11

Some people can remember the exact day that they were converted. It may have been at a church service, or a Bible Class camp, or even at a Billy Graham Crusade (as one of our members recalls).

I can't remember the exact day I was converted, but I can remember significant years in my life when I had a significant 'God-experience' or 'God-moment'.

I've mentioned once before that aged 14 was a special year for me. I'd gone from being a nominal church attender – to being a believer. I was formally 'confirmed' and took my first communion and became a communicant member of my family church.

I was aware that I was leaving something behind and entering a new phase in my spiritual journey. Crossing an invisible bridge in my short life.

This was followed by another experience as 19 year old when I became involved with the charismatic renewal movement.

For the first time, I realized what the Holy Spirit was. Not the zombie-like ghost of Jesus coming out of the tomb – The Holy Ghost. But, God's presence, which is everywhere.

I've had lots of other 'God-moments', or God-experiences in my (now) long life. Experiences which have deepened my faith and made my faith broader and more abundant. Experiences which have given me the strength to weather the storms in my life. Put the past behind me and move on to the future.

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 6 and our gospel reading from Luke Chapter 5 have many similarities.

Both readings are about 'conversion experiences' - or 'God-moments'.

Isaiah's God-moment, was on a much grander scale than Peter's, but there is a common pattern in Isaiah's and Peter's and I suggest in all conversion experiences.

In 1917 German theologian and philosopher Rudolph Otto published a seminal book called 'The Idea of the Holy'.

In his famous book, Otto described the encounter with the Divine – or the Numinous.

Otto used the word, ‘numinous’ (taken from the word ‘numen’, meaning divine power) to describe ‘The Holy’.

He described a little bit about the nature of that encounter:

‘The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its “profane,” non-religious mood of everyday experience’.

‘[...] It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.’

The encounter with the numinous elicits from within all human beings a sense of awe, dread and fascination.

The closest comparison I could think of, is floating on your back in the ocean and looking up at the sky. Realizing your own insignificance against the vastness of the ocean and the sky.

Or gazing up at the Milky Way at night – you become aware of the infinite and your own very temporary finitude.

You may feel that sense of awe and dread.

Another key concept in Otto’s encounter with the Holy is the term: *Mysterium Tremendum*, which is more than just a ‘tremendous experience’.

It is an all-engulfing experience that is both terrifying and fascinating at the same time. Like standing alone on the precipice of high cliff, feeling the fatal tug of the great emptiness below.

In Celtic tradition they talk of ‘Thin Places’ where people can experience the numinous, or the holy places where something significant has happened in the past. One such place is the Iona Abbey where the gospel was first preached in Scotland by St Columba.

Maori have their own ‘thin places’ – places of significance where the arrival of ancestors took place, or burial grounds where the dead depart to the next life. The scene of
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significant battles, like Ruapekapeka, the site of the last major land battle between Pakeha and Maori. Or the scene of a legendary tale – like nearby Te Mata Peak which legend says is the body of the giant Te Mata, Chief of Waimarama.

In Aotearoa NZ there are many ‘Thin Places’ but they have not all been recognized as such until more recently. E.g. Oihi Bay where the gospel was first preached in Aotearoa NZ, in 1814 is one of them.

John Hornblow has recently written a book called ‘Pilgrimage Aotearoa’ in which he offers a commentary on at least 100 places which could be regarded as sacred places – or Thin Places in Aotearoa.

All churches should be Thin Places in the sense that they are all dedicated ‘holy, or sacred spaces of worship’ where one might expect to meet the divine presence.

Going back to Rudolph Otto ’s description of the encounter with the numinous – Otto goes on to say that the encounter is often accompanied by a sense of unworthiness.

Isaiah and Peter both expressed their sense of unworthiness and sinfulness.

Isaiah in Isaiah 6:5:

‘And I said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"’

Peter in Luke 5:8:

‘But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus's knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"’

Realising the greatness of God and our own insignificance, or our own weakness, our own sinfulness, is often the turning point, in the process of conversion.

The next movement in the life of Isaiah and Peter is that they were ready to put their old lives behind them and commit the rest of their lives to ‘revealing the reign of God’ to others. Or sharing the Good News of God’s reign, with others.

In the words of Luke, ‘They left everything and followed him...’

I'm not a believer in the Prosperity Gospel, or I wouldn't be a Presbyterian Minister on a modest income. But immediately after their conversions, for a time at least, both Isaiah and Peter experienced a surge of 'Abundant Life'. Or a surge of grace-filled Life.

The message of Isaiah and Jesus and Luke is, that God gives the believer Abundant Life. A life full of undeserved favour.

That abundance is symbolized in our readings today by Isaiah's eventual influence on God's people. Isaiah became one of the greatest of the Jewish prophets, and to Christians, Isaiah was the Harbinger prophesying the coming of the Messiah.

We read Isaiah's Messianic prophecies every year during Holy Week.

In that beautiful passage from Isaiah 53:3 Jesus is identified as the 'Man of sorrows acquainted with grief ... the one who suffered for the sins of us all'.

Isaiah's ministry was filled with a richness and abundance that endures to this day among the Abrahamic Faiths. He has been called, 'The Prince of the prophets'.

Peter's abundant life is symbolized by a net bursting with fish.

After fishing all night and catching nothing, Jesus urges him to try again in another part of the lake – and his net becomes full to overflowing.

This is the precursor to Peter's future life where he will become a fisher of people, which is what Peter became.

Luke depicts God as the giver of abundant life. The net bursting with fish.

By abundant life I don't mean they suddenly became rich or prosperous. Or that they were immune from dying. Abundant life is a life that is full of meaning and a purpose. An abundant life is one in which we are fully aware of the Numinous and the sacred in life. Even more so these days when we are aware of our fragile environment.

Abundant life is one that is full of gratitude to the One who gives us life. This gratitude is irrepressible. Abundant life is one that is full of love, hope and faith and all the other fruits of the Spirit. (Galatians 5).

Even when we face death, we face death with the hope and the knowledge that we are always in the presence/grace of God.

Luke is also saying in this gospel story of Peter's conversion – that when we try to please God in our own strength, life (our nets) can be empty.

When we listen, or place God in the centre of life, we experience God's abundance.

When we leave everything behind to follow Jesus, we receive abundant life.

I'd like to finish with a prayer attributed to St Brendan The Navigator, an Irish saint who, some say, sailed in a coracle (leather-bound boat) across the arctic circle to North America.

St Brendan was known as one of the Twelve Apostles to Ireland.

The prayer captures the courageous attitude of the missionary leaving all behind to follow Christ.

St. Brendan's Prayer

Shall I abandon, O King of mysteries, the soft comforts of home? Shall I turn my back on my native land, and turn my face towards the sea?

Shall I put myself wholly at your mercy, without silver, without a horse, without fame, without honour? Shall I throw myself wholly upon You, without sword and shield, without food and drink, without a bed to lie on?

*Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land, placing myself under Your yoke?
Shall I pour out my heart to You, confessing my manifold sins and begging forgiveness, tears streaming down my cheeks? Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach, a record of my final prayer in my native land?*

Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict? Shall I take my tiny boat across the wide sparkling ocean? O King of the Glorious Heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?

O Christ, will You help me on the wild waves?