

*John Docherty, March 5, 2017*

## **We hunger**

I'm not usually tempted to take the safe route when preparing my meditations. Generally speaking, I prefer to give myself permission to explore some of what I consider to be the more complicated elements of the Lectionary texts; the parts that raise questions and require a little bit of a struggle.

In fact, unless the text provokes something in me – either positively or negatively – I'd rather give it a pass and focus on one that gives me food for thought; something that stretches me in some way.

Mary-Lou will tell you that this is just a personality quirk that plays itself out in any number of ways. She'll be quite happy to tell you I don't feel like a holiday has been truly satisfying unless it involves some kind of physical challenge. She'll probably phrase it a little less delicately and say I don't enjoy a holiday unless it involves pain and suffering of some kind : portaging on a canoe trip; hiking up the side of a steep mountain; visiting the in-laws ... or, worse yet, visiting my own family.

But I have to admit that I've been tempted to play it safe with today's meditation.

The Lectionary / Leader magazine theme for Lent is “Restore us O God!”, and today's specific theme is “We hunger.”

The 'hunger' motif is most obviously present in the Matthew passage that was suggested for today, and it's the passage that the Leader magazine homes in on : Jesus in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil at a time when he is fasting and vulnerable to the offerings of food, power and recognition.

The other New Testament passage – the one we read from Romans – is a little less obvious in this respect, but it's not without its relevance to the idea of “hungering after” something.

It's a passage in which Paul contrasts the effect of Adam's sin with the effect of Jesus' life and death.

It's a passage that tries to paint a picture of the scope of Jesus' sacrifice, and the enormous gift that that sacrifice represents to humanity.

Paul says, for example, that “... just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all ...”

And that is the phrase that made me want to play it safe and stick with the Matthew passage,

because it's a phrase that raises all kinds of questions for me.

But because I'm a bit of a masochist, I'm going to try to deal with some of those questions, and I'm going to try to honestly lay out for you some of the temptations and challenges that I struggle with as I try to fathom the implications of that statement.

The challenge isn't an intellectual challenge of making this passage fit the "hunger" motif.

That's easy enough.

We hunger for many things, and we trust God to restore us from our sense of lack.

Some of what we hunger for are healthy things, others, less so.

Among the healthy things, we hunger for food and sustenance of various kinds : the basic essentials of life. And we trust God to provide this for us.

We hunger for safety and security : we want to know we'll make it through the day and have a reasonably stable existence. And we trust God to provide this for us.

We hunger for a place in society : a job or occupation, paid or otherwise, that provides us with a channel for meaningful use of our energies. And we trust God to provide this for us.

We hunger for love : the assurance that we're valued; that we're connected to people that are significant to us, and to whom we are significant. And we trust God to provide this for us.

On a perhaps less healthy level, depending on the extent to which we have these hungers, and the extent to which we have them in dysfunctional ways, we hunger for power : power over others; power in the form of wealth; power in the form of absolute freedom to do as we like. And I suppose we trust God to look the other way as we seek to provide this for ourselves.

We hunger for recognition : ego-building affirmation of our skills, talents, intellect. And we trust God to look the other way as we seek to provide this for ourselves

We hunger.

But I think at the heart of all of this is the deepest hunger of all, and the hunger that is hinted at in Paul's declaration that Jesus' life and sacrifice is far more powerful than Adam's transgression.

"... just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all ..."

We hunger for life.

And this is the point where I leave the safety of an easy meditation and enter a more personal zone of struggle, so I'm going to shift from speaking in the third person to speaking in the first person.

*I* hunger for life.

I hunger for an assurance that the eighty-odd years most of us can hope for is not all there is.

And on the assumption that these few decades are not all there is, I hunger for a God of mercy, rather than a God of judgment.

And that hunger for mercy is not only for me, but for those I love, and those I don't even know.

When I read this passage from Romans, I can't avoid analyzing this comparison between Adam and Jesus.

If, as Paul says, and as is hinted at in the creation story of Genesis, death came to all of humanity as a result of Adam's sin, then surely life has come to all of humanity as a result of Jesus' act of redemption.

It's in these words of Paul that we find some of the seeds of an interpretation of scripture that allows for universal salvation for all of humanity, not just the chosen few, or the few who have believed certain things, or done certain things.

And this is where *I'm* tempted. I think Paul holds out hope for salvation for everyone, but I don't think in this passage he's suggesting that salvation comes without conditions.

I think he's quite clear in the surrounding passages and elsewhere that he believes that only a select few will enjoy an eternity in God's presence.

But *I* hunger for a God of mercy, not judgment. I hunger for a God who is incapable of condemning anyone to an eternity of torment following a few decades of breath and struggle.

I've already said in other meditations that I don't believe our scriptures teach that there is a literal place of eternal punishment called Hell, but I do think there is a very clear message that we risk separating ourselves from God in some fashion, as we separate ourselves from each other.

Even in Paul's writings you'd be hard pressed to find any clear message of what to expect after death, other than a promise of resurrection and some form of judgment.

Other than a handful of verses that use metaphoric language to describe what it means to be separated from God, we have very little information on what to expect after death.

But we have lots of information on how to live this life.

We have lots of encouragement to pay attention to how we treat each other.

We have lots of examples of lives gone wrong; of pain and suffering inflicted on others.

And we *also* have lots of examples of acts of remorse; of gestures of mercy and redemption; of hope that lives can be reclaimed and rebuilt.

Jesus spent his entire ministry reaching out to anyone who would listen; preaching a message of reconciliation and generous grace.

I hunger to hear *that* message in the words of this Book.

I hunger to hear that even while we were yet enemies, to use a term Paul uses a little earlier in Romans chapter 5, God so loved us that reconciliation and salvation were made possible.

I hunger for a God who was willing to put on human flesh and walk among people like me.

I hunger for a God who knows what it's like to reach out and be rebuffed; but who also has the capacity to forgive that rejection, and love all the same.

I hunger for a God who knows what it means to suffer, and who would *never* inflict such suffering on another.

I say all of this knowing that it sometimes comes dangerously close to a position, or belief system, that may seem at times at odds with our Mennonite Confession of Faith.

A universal salvation for all is *not* what we have traditionally held to be the lot of humanity.

We recognize that there is a call in this Book to living in right relationships, and that there are consequences for not doing so.

We accept that there are those who willingly choose to turn their backs on God and on each other, and that God will not force love on us, nor force an artificial reconciliation that ignores the need for recognition of hurt and some form of restitution.

But if I'm to be honest, it *is* a fair expression of my personal hunger for God.

I hunger for a God who is not *less* willing to love his enemies than I am, but *more* willing to do so.

And yet, with C. S. Lewis, I also wonder about how to reconcile this hope of salvation for all with the free exercise of the power to turn one's back on God.

And so, by way of an answer to that, I'd like to close off this meditation with a quote from Lewis' "The Great Divorce". Without the context of the entire story, the quote may seem a little cryptic, but the premise is that Lewis finds himself on a journey to heaven and is trying to make sense of what he's seeing, and who he's meeting.

The idea is that God is enthroned at the top of a mountain in Heaven, and we are all on a journey, either moving towards God, and so coming closer and closer to each other in the process, or away from God, and so more and more isolated from each other as well.

This particular excerpt is a conversation between Lewis and George MacDonald.

Lewis begins :

"But I don't understand. Is judgment not final? Is there really a way out of Hell into Heaven?"

"It depends on the way ye're using the words. If they leave that grey town behind it will not have been Hell ... And perhaps ye had better not call this country Heaven. Not *Deep Heaven*, ye understand ... Ye can call it the Valley of the Shadow of Life. And yet to those who stay here it will have been Heaven from the first. And ye can call those sad streets in the town yonder the Valley of the Shadow of Death : but to those who remain there they will have been Hell even from the beginning."

...

Both processes begin even before death. The good man's past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven: the bad man's past already conforms to this badness and is filled only with dreariness. And that is why, at the end of all things, when the sun rises here and the twilight turns to blackness down there the Blessed will say, 'We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,' and the Lost, 'We were always in Hell.' And both will speak truly."