

Presbytery of North East Victoria – Chairperson's letter of Encouragement

Dear friends,

Have you noticed that sometimes the most painful things we learn in life are the things we finally admit to ourselves about ourselves – generally after a long period of struggle or denial or avoidance? (I am struck by the thought that this may not be the most cheery introduction to a letter, but I have always written to you from my heart and generally out of the heat of what is happening within and around me, so I hope you will forgive me and read on.)

Ministers have a particular entry into peoples' lives. We see the struggle, the denial, and the avoidance, and we know these things in ourselves - sometimes all too well - they are part of life. Over the years my own struggles have given me fresh insight into the biblical story of David. Not the early, naïve, farm-boy, slayer of giants, but the old man who, again and again, has had to come to terms both with his failures on so many fronts and with the terrible, painful, consequences of those failures for himself and for others. Our own particular failings might not be as spectacular as those of David, but his larger-than-life example helps us to see ourselves more clearly. More importantly, perhaps, his story helps us to see that despite our failures, ongoing life in harmony with God, with each other and with ourselves, is possible.

It takes a lot for us to face up to our failures and failings, large or small. It takes courage. It involves choice. We learn things that we really don't want to know about ourselves, but the minute that we do face up, the minute that we accept what we have come to recognise, something changes. The Christian author CS Lewis saw this change as a movement towards greater harmony with God, with those around us, and importantly with ourselves. As he put it, we move away from bottled up rage, from impotence and loneliness towards peace within and without. We might say we come to be at home with God, with ourselves and others.

At a time when blaming others and laying off responsibility for our actions is more the norm, I wonder are we good at self-examination anymore? Every child is invited at some time or another to *think about their actions and their motivations*. Has this practice been lost in adult life? I wonder if we have forgotten that the purpose of an examined life, is not guilt, but peace.

Recognising and changing our attitudes and actions can be painful but my own experience would tell me that such change is necessary to the inner-peace that comes from what the Christian tradition calls righteousness - a word that means having our relationships in right or good or proper order with God, with other creatures and with ourselves.

There is a line, or two, from a hymn ringing my ear right now: *O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer*. The hymn is talking about confession, in a personal sense, in the intimacy of prayer. It is talking about the peace and comfort that comes from laying out our lives before God in this way. It is equally true that often we need others to help us to see ourselves more clearly, to lovingly hold the Christ example before us and to remind us that there are choices and changes that bring us into closer harmony with God, with all around us and within.

As Christians, as we wonder at our role in this changing world the capacity to practice and to teach the art of self-examination seems important. There are models to choose from. Ignatius of Loyola developed a simple five-word process, the Wesleyan movement has a more extensive set of questions. I commend them to you.

May you be encouraged in your life and in your lives together,

Gereldine