

Along the track

Fleeting Glimpses

Some time ago, Clive James wrote a very poignant article during a lull in his struggle with leukaemia. It contained the following extract:

So I look out into the garden with anticipation as well as apprehension. My Japanese maple tree is now in its first flames. Last year I saw the transformation as a sign of the end. Now I prefer to see it as a portent of spring.
Each glimpse of the tree reminds me of a beautiful Italian word my future wife taught me 50 years ago in Florence. The word was scorcio (say "score-cho"). It means a glimpse. From one of our coffee bars we could look down a narrow street and see the spire of the abbey-church of the Badia outlined against the sky. The spire was a revelation of elegance, as my tree is now. Looking back, you realise that glimpses are all you ever get. There is so little time.

I suppose all of us have come to the realisation that life goes pretty quickly, especially as you grow older. Our rather rare times for reflection are peppered with glimpses of wonderful memories and experiences, places and people. Life is filled with such glimpses – we can treasure them and find joy in them or even accept them as stepping stones for faith in a loving God, a God of Surprises, as Pope Francis says. Or we may even find them a source of sadness, disappointment, even anger.

A number of Church documents refer to 'the pedagogy of God'. For example, *God uses a pedagogy to reveal himself to the human person: God uses human events and words to communicate God's plan; God does so progressively and in stages so as to draw even closer to us...*

(General Directory for Catechesis #38)

A pedagogy means teaching in ways we can understand and at times when we are ready. Like any good teacher, God's revelation recognising our ability to understand and our readiness to hear so it comes progressively, not all at once, and in stages of our faith journey so that we can hear and understand. Matthew's Gospel describes an incident involving Peter, James and John which happened when they were open and ready to receive its message. Jesus knows that his death is imminent and that the faith of his closest followers will be sorely tested. To bolster their faith, he took with him Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

It is pretty safe to say that none of us will have that experience, but perhaps our glimpses of the wonder and beauty of life, however fleeting they may be, are our 'transfiguration moments'. If we are open to it, they too can bolster our faith and give us a glimpse of what life is all about.

The Transfiguration reminds us that every now and then we can have an experience, a revelation, as it were and see life in a different way. Such an experience can bring us to a new understanding of the ordinary, the seemingly mundane. The poet Seamus Heaney wrote about the episode where Jesus writes in the dirt and diverts a crowd from stoning a woman who has been caught committing adultery. Heaney suggested that it is Jesus's writing on the ground with his finger that diverts the angry mob. For two thousand years, perhaps just as for those who were there at the time, this small gesture has made us wonder. What was he writing? Why? It is intriguing, diverting. 'It takes the eyes away from the obsession of the moment,' Heaney wrote.

Is that what the 'glimpses' of simple wonder and beauty we have in life are meant to do, to take us away from our obsessions, our focus on the here and now? Are they meant to remind us that there is little time here and also that what awaits us is beyond words, beyond our immediate comprehension? Are these glimpses offered to us so that we might re-order our priorities perhaps? Or confirm us in what we are doing and why we are doing it?

The transfiguration was in the end a passing moment, it was never meant to be captured or held. Three permanent tabernacles were never built, as Peter suggested. When Peter, James and John came down the mountain they still found people in need; people struggling with difficulties and challenges, people seeking meaning in life. But perhaps this experience gave them a much richer understanding of the purpose of life.

The second half of Clive James' article described one of his special 'glimpses' – the evening spent looking after his small granddaughter. A reminder, surely, that God speaks to us in ways we can understand. It is so easy to go looking in the wrong places and miss the messages that come to us daily in the commonplace, in simple packages, as it were. 'Glimpses' are usually best seen in the events we too often consider to be 'ordinary'. Often we become fixated on the newer, the faster. We rarely linger and simply the small moments, the small memories. We seem to be constantly hoping that something bigger and better is just up ahead. We can miss the possibility in each and every interaction, in each and every moment. But it is in these ordinary things that can change the course of a day, and subsequently, a life. The ordinary, over time, is what amounts to the extraordinary. Sometimes we just need to get out of our own heads, to stop obsessing in Heaney's words, long enough to realise it.

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au