

Food For Thought Article: 'Finding the Part God Wants Us to Play in His Drama.'

One of the differences between Jesus and you and me, is that Jesus chose to be born whereas you and I did not; we had no say in the matter whatsoever. We just discovered ourselves to be alive and kicking in this world; our arrival was nothing to do with us! So, is there a reason and a purpose why we are here?

In Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings', Sam asks his friend Frodo a very important question. He says, 'I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?'

We too can ask ourselves, 'Is there a story to life? Is history His [God's] story, or is it, as someone once said, 'Just one damn thing after another' – a kind of never-ending soap-opera whose actors and script-writers change, but whose essential themes remain the same? Is there a plot, a plan, and a purpose of any note? And are there big actors on the world stage with key and starring roles, whilst most of us only have brief, and relatively insignificant, walk-on parts?

Jaques, in Shakespeare's play '*As You Like It*,' is convinced that, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.' (Act 2, Scene 7)

I want to suggest that the Bible, and the events it contains, reveals the greatest drama ever written and offers, to those who will heed its message, an opportunity to be involved with, and become part of, the reality of God's glorious overarching plan for humankind. Our responsibility is to find the part God wants us to play in His Drama.

The apostle Paul puts it like this: [And God] 'made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.' (Ephesians 1:9&10) If this isn't true, I would suggest the alternatives are bleak indeed.

As Jaques reminds us when, in the same speech and having gone through six ages of life, he comes to the final seventh age and concludes that, 'The last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth ('sans' is French for 'without'), sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.' And nowadays we could add 'sans mental capacity,' this having overtaken cancer as the greatest fear older people have.

And Macbeth arrives at an equally bleak understanding of life and death when he says, 'Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' (Macbeth, Act 5 Scene 5). Bleak indeed.

Contrast this with the revelation and experiences of God's people in the Bible.

What about two ladies called Shiprah and Puah?

They were Hebrew immigrants who worked for the national health service in Egypt as midwives! The Pharaoh said to them one day, 'When the Hebrew women give birth to a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.' But there was something different about these two midwives. They feared God more than they feared Pharaoh, and they chose to disobey his command and to let the boys live (Ex. Chapter 1). They were God's women in that place at that time and were caught up in God's drama, God's plan, and His purpose to protect His people.

What about Moses?

At 3 months old, he found himself in a reed basket, bobbing up and down in the water on the banks of the river Nile. Pharaoh had changed tack and given a general decree that all male Hebrew babies should be thrown into the Nile and drowned. Moses was in a basket because his mother had put him there and she was hoping that Pharaoh's daughter, who came down to the river to bathe, would find him and take him home. And this is what happened ~ Moses was brought up as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

He was God's man in that place and position at that time. He was caught up in God's drama and God's purpose, later to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt and into the Promised Land. And what about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Samson, Esther, Ruth, Mary, Peter, Paul etc., everyone with a part to play in God's unfolding drama down through the ages.

What part are we playing in God's plan of salvation today? It does not matter who we are, or where we are, God has a part for us to play ~ in the classroom, in the hospital or care home, in the sports club, in the factory, in the civil service, in the church, in politics etc. ~ in our youth, in our middle age, in our older age.

However, there are certain things, it seems to me, that must happen to us and conclusions that we must reach, before we can really be convinced about the truth of what Paul writes in those verses from Ephesians I mentioned earlier - Eph.1:9&10. For we do not automatically see, understand, or enter God's plan

and purpose, or even acknowledge that there is one, without the following 7 realisations taking place in our lives:

1. *We need to meet God in the wilderness.*

The desert played a crucial role in the formation of the people of God in the Old Testament, 'In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste.' (Deut. 32:10a), and before Jesus started his public ministry he was 'led by the Spirit in the desert (Lk. 4:1). Immediately after his conversion, Paul went into the Arabian desert (Gal. 1:17). We also have the testimonies of the early desert Father's like St. Antony of Egypt (251-356 AD) and Evagrius (345-399 AD) etc.

Of course, all the desert has to offer is its emptiness, its barrenness, its silence, its solitude, and this can be very unsettling for us and come as a great challenge and a shock as we live out our lives in this frantic, complex, noisy and entertainment driven 21st century world.

I highlight entertainment because the U.K. home entertainment industry is currently one of the fastest growing. Music, video and especially gaming sales have gone through the roof; £11 billion in 2022 up 40% from 2019. Is it a truism that wherever we go now we want to be entertained, possibly even in church?

But in the wilderness, there is no entertainment to be had, no trees to be seen, no cars to be heard, no streets, no buildings, nothing to suggest human habitation. No laptops or mobile phones, no playstations, no social life, no one to influence or be influenced by, no media to read, view or listen to. No promotional ladder to be scaled, no deadlines to be met. In the desert, the world seems far away. No occasions either for bitterness or family squabbles; just a dry haven of refuge, a dusty paradise in which all we are left with is our thirsty soul and where we have no other concern than to look for God and hear his voice. Surely the most sublime, yet neglected, state that any human being can aspire to.

So, it seems to me, that the place to begin if we want to be convinced that God is there, that he has a plan and purpose and that we have a part to play in his great drama, is the wilderness; the place where we seek God, where we find him and where we discover that to find is to keep.

2. *We need to have our eyes opened to the fantasies and hollowness of all human kingdoms, institutions, and organisations - political/ religious /*

economic etc. – and be delivered from their seductive and sometimes malign influence.

Maybe you doubt the sentence you have just read, in which case I draw your attention to the corruption that is endemic across the globe in governments, institutions, private organisations, churches, businesses, banks etc. Corruption is defined as ‘any dishonest or illegal behaviour that benefits a few people at the cost of many.’ It plays a significant role in the poverty and inequality which exist in the world. As the world news shows us every day ~ money, power, and corruption very often go hand in hand.

Having his eyes opened to this reality and being able to withstand this temptation was the starting point for Jesus and his ministry. The devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’ (Mt. 4:8&9). But Jesus refused the offer and invites you and me to do the same.

The alternative to the bogus kingdoms of the world that the devil offers us, is the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. As Christians, we are released *from* the false kingdoms and the fantasy of power through money, sex, popularity, possessions etc., and we are released *into* the reality of God’s Kingdom which is characterised by love, joy, peace, and righteousness.

However, we need great discernment to know what constitutes the devil’s offer of ‘all the kingdoms of the world’ and what comprises ‘the Kingdom of God.’ And we should also recognise that although the wilderness is often the place of revelation, it can also be the place where conflict and spiritual warfare are the most intense.

3. We need to discover that life in all its fullness is not found in the pursuit of sensual pleasure.

Again, this was the starting point for Jesus. The devil said to him, ‘Turn those stones into bread,’ thus satisfying Jesus’ heightened craving for food at this point in his life and ministry (Mt. 4:4). Whatever the urge is - food, drink, sex, popularity, money, power, exercise, adventure, shopping etc – none of these things **alone** will ultimately bring satisfaction.

In the Bible, it is the book of Ecclesiastes, and the testimony of Solomon who wrote it, that reveals this truth perhaps more than anywhere or anyone else.

In the pleasure department there was no-one to touch Solomon. He could eat whatever he wanted; he could have a sexual relationship with whomsoever he wanted (700 wives and 300 concubines – 1 Ki.11:3) and he writes this: ‘I said to myself, “Let’s go for it – experiment with pleasure, have a good time! So, everything I wanted I took – I never said no to myself. I gave in to every impulse, held back nothing. I sucked the marrow of pleasure out of every task – my reward to myself for a hard day’s work!”’

But what conclusion did he draw from all this indulgence? He said, it was empty, insane, meaningless, he was never satisfied, it was like spitting into the wind ~ it all just blew back in his face (Eccles. Chapter 2 – The Message).

Of course, pleasure in and of itself is not inherently wrong, enjoying life is God’s good gift to us. But the pursuit of pleasure alone, separated from God, cannot and will not give deep down satisfaction.

Unless we allow God’s Word and his Spirit to set us free, we are imprisoned in the tiny dark dungeon of our ego and the pitiless servitude of our senses – we are restricted to what Pascal calls ‘licking the earth.’

4. As we emerge from our time in the wilderness, having now learned not to put our trust in human institutions – even monarchies – and having recognised that life cannot be found purely in the pursuit of sensual pleasure, we are then enabled to see and meet God in his wider creation.

The lessons are profound. Jesus says, look at the birds of the air and see them as an antidote to fear and worry in times of economic hardship. Open your eyes and look at the lilies of the field; they are not working all hours in order to put clothes on their backs! Pagans worry about all these things but you, my dear disciples, you are to be different. Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness and he will provide for all your material needs. Father thinks you are much more valuable than birds or lilies. (See Mt. 6:25-34)

And what can we learn from the furry caterpillar?!

Imagine a furry caterpillar creeping along to meet his mates and he says, ‘Hey, guys, do you know that at some point you are going to be entombed in a thing called a chrysalis, but when you come out of that chrysalis you will have a completely different body – more beautiful, more colourful, more

wonderful than your present bodies - and guess what, no longer will you be creepers and crawlers along the ground, but you'll be able to fly!! Wowee!!'

I wonder how many of his mates would believe him! But when you have been in the wilderness, seen through the pretensions of human kingdoms and realised that the pursuit of sensual pleasure is not going to yield life in all its fullness, these illustrations from nature and creation come alive in a new, thrilling, vibrant and revealing way.

5. And then as we see God in nature, we are enabled to serve and minister to our fellow human beings, the climax of God's creation in this world; those made in his very image and likeness. And especially those who are in need.

'Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.' (Deut. 15:10&11)

'Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.' (Prov. 14:31)

'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.' (Prov. 31:8)

Some years ago, an experiment was carried out in which a picture of a pair of eyes was placed next to an offering box in which people deposited their gifts. They discovered that when the eyes were there, people gave more than when the picture of the eyes was removed! When people thought they were being watched, even though it was just a picture, they gave more! Perhaps we should adopt this in church?!

I wonder how we respond to this verse from Jeremiah: 'Your [God's] eyes are open to all the ways of all mankind; you reward each person according to their conduct and as their deeds deserve' (Jer. 32:19).

6. But in order to be able to love others and serve their needs, we must be able to love ourselves, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' not instead of yourself. So, we need to have a clear understanding of our identity in Christ and be sure of what our gifts and callings are and what they are not.

Jesus' 'ego strength' was amazing! This was because he knew where he had come from (origin), who he was (identity), why he was here (purpose) and where he was going (destiny). And when we know this, we do not need to know anything else!

And Paul says that **we**, Christians, were chosen in Christ before the creation of the world (origin.) **We** are adopted into his family as beloved sons and daughters (identity). God has made known to **us** the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ and created **us** in Christ to do good works which he prepared in advance for **us** to walk in (purpose). And God has blessed and seated **us** in the heavenly realms, and given **us** a glorious hope (this is about present reality and future destiny). (See Eph. Chapter 1)

What more could God have done?!

So, having this secure identity in Christ (knowing who we are) we can then discover what gifts we have (what he wants us to do).

Romans 12:1-8; 1 Cor.12; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 4:9-11 will help us in this regard.

'Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.' (1 Peter 4:10).

7. The last thing I want to mention which is key if we are to arrive at the conclusion that God has an overarching plan which we can be part of, is that suffering, disappointment, failure, and affliction are all an integral part of the drama of human existence, and that God weaves all these things into his plan and purposes, both for us as individuals, our families and for the world.

"All things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose"(Rms. 8:28). Notice that Paul does not say everything that happens to us **is** good, but will work together **for** good),

The story is told of an elderly lady who went to see Shakespeare's play, 'King Lear,' just after he had written it in 1605. After the play, which is one of Shakespeare's tragedies, the woman said to him, 'What a terrible play that is! Fancy making that poor old man suffer all the things he did! All that pain, misery, humiliation, mental anguish. What were you thinking of?'

And Shakespeare said to the woman, 'You are right Madam, he did suffer terribly and went through an awful lot. Of course, I could have spared him all

that suffering and let him die peacefully in his bed at the end of Act 1. But if I had done that Madam,' I wouldn't have had a play.'

Although God does not initiate evil and suffering in this world, He does at times allow it and responds by weaving it into His overall plan and purpose, as we have already noted in Romans 8:28.

However, you may have found this King Lear illustration unsatisfactory. Thinking it through a bit more, wouldn't it have been better, from King Lear's point of view, if there had never been a play and then he wouldn't have had to suffer at all? Wouldn't it have been better if, knowing all the suffering which would ensue, God had never created the world and you and me in the first place?



But it is in the context of his suffering, and in the context of his youngest daughter Cordelia's suffering, that Lear says to Cordelia near the end of the play just before they both die:

'Come let's away to prison; we two alone will sing like birds in the cage. And take upon us the mystery of things, as if we were God's spies.' (Act 5 Scene 3)

Perhaps this is the main point of the play. That sometimes it is through suffering that we come to God, learn more of God and especially the mystery of God.

And perhaps he has put you and me into this world as his spies, as it were; to be a bit subversive, to merge in with our friends, our families, our communities, our culture, in order to bring God's presence and perspective to life, its meaning and its purpose..... especially as it relates to suffering and affliction. We are here to tell His story in His great 'mystery play.'

Paul writes: '[God] has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ....' (Eph. 1:9).

And he says, 'Pray for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel...' (Eph. 6:19)

And of course, the symbol of God's drama is supremely the Cross. So, Paul writes, 'May I never boast **except in the cross** of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.' (Gal. 6:14)

But sometimes we have emptied the cross of its power by substituting words of human wisdom instead. Or sometimes we have failed to preach the cross because it is unpopular, a stumbling block to some, foolishness to others.

But for those who are being saved, for those who have entered God's plan and purpose for their lives, the message of the cross is 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes' (Rms. 1:16)

Sometimes we have sanitised the cross. I have a picture on my computer at home, of a man in a high viz jacket with a tank of disinfectant strapped to his back and a pressurised spray in his hand. He is busy disinfecting a marble statue of the crucifixion scene. Jesus, disinfected; Mary, disinfected; the other women at the foot of the cross, all disinfected. A sanitised cross. Perhaps this is symbolic of how we have come to represent the cross today. [The photo was taken in Ireland during the pandemic. Because people kissed the figures in this statue, the figures had to be regularly sprayed to avoid contamination.]

Sometimes we have romanticised the cross. You may see an example of this in the church building you attend, where the cross is placed between two candles. But Jesus was not crucified between two candles, he was crucified between two criminals. What a shocking scene it must have been.

And, at Communion, every time we drink from the cup and eat the bread, we are remembering the shed blood and the broken body of Jesus and are, yet again, proclaiming the crucifixion of the Lord until he comes.

So, with the cross at the centre of our preaching, proclamation, and witness, we are saying that God has put suffering, pain, rejection, anguish, betrayal, and affliction at the heart of his salvation plan. And Jesus' invitation to us is to take up our cross daily and follow him.

Summary: In order to be convinced that God has an overall plan and purpose for all that is happening to us personally, in our families, in our churches, communities, nations, and the world at large, and to be assured that we have a part to play in His drama, we need to: -

1. Meet with God in the desert place.
2. Be set free from the fantasy and allurements of the 'kingdoms of this world' in order to embrace the Kingdom of God.
3. No longer believe that fullness of life can be found in the pursuit of sensual pleasure alone.
4. See God in his wider creation.
5. Focus on service and ministry to other human beings.
6. Discover our identity in Christ and what our gifts are.
7. Recognise that suffering is an integral part of God's purpose and plan, exemplified for us in this life, by the ministry and death of Jesus.

George Irving – August 2023

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