

Urgency & Sustenance

As an 18 year old, I helped to organise a national conference on poverty, for Year 12 students. The CEO of an organisation that served people on the street gave a firebrand address on the need for young adults who would burn themselves out in service to the poor. I thought it was a great message for the high-achieving audience for whom 'service to the poor' would be squeezed around careers. But the conference organisers gave a corrective speech the next day, explicitly rejecting the CEO's message, and emphasising that doing the *little things* is what matters, doing *what you are able to*. Which for those listening meant serving the poor in the context of a career which would give them status and wealth. Although I said nothing, I realised that I disagreed with this corrective. The state of the world requires *urgency*, a desperate plunge into the pain of the world and of its people.¹

Without such a plunge into the turbulent waters of poverty, pain and evil, we can never hope to achieve any change, or know God. What else is the Incarnation if it is not such a plunge? As a young man new to radical discipleship, I was saving the world. People were lonely, destructive, addicted, homeless. Communities were self-obsessed and wealth-focussed, uncaring about the marginalised. Churches were club-like and insular. The world was corrupt, unjust and on the highway to hell. These realities demanded an urgent response, as they do now.

Once we make this initial plunge, we need to learn how to swim; otherwise we flounder, pulling others under with us to drown together. Learning to swim is what I call *sustenance*. As a slightly older young man, I realised that the evil and corruption that I saw all around me was also inside me. The questions that drove me began to change, from 'How can I change the world?' to 'How will I keep living this life?' We slow down. We become less outrageous in our demands of others, if not ourselves. We work at ways of financially supporting ourselves. We integrate children into this life, which necessitates massive readjustment of expectations. We reflect. We see that *others have laboured, and [we] have entered into that labour*.² Our own efforts are not seen as primary, but as a current within an already flowing river. All this is essential, not least for shearing ourselves of youthful arrogance, but also to keep living our vocation for longer than the brief flare of adolescent passion.

Urgency: First Among Equals

However, some contemporary calls for '*sustainability in mission*' make me think of a person swimming in a puddle on the bank of the river. They have, it appears, all the necessary skills for a long swim, but none of the heart to plunge in. Such calls for sustenance are really calls for risk-averse faith; an oxymoron of the purest kind.

As with all paradoxical truths, the ends of the spectrum (urgency/sustenance) need to be embraced simultaneously; in practice, a task too difficult for most of us. The best I manage is to swing from one to the other. Whether we (right now) need to focus on urgency or sustenance is a matter for personal reflection upon our current spiritual condition. But can I venture a generalisation? We urge sustenance *too quickly*. In urging restraint and slow-burn we are stunting growth and inducing timidity, when full-blown ignition is required to cannon us free

¹ By *urgency* I mean not simply *speed*, but *wholehearted devotion*.

² John 4:38

from the gravity of the forces that keep us anchored to all that is against Christ.³ Our culture already inculcates us against taking the path less travelled; why do we need to reinforce this timidity by counselling caution before we encourage risk? We need to be around fools for Christ, to remember again the urgency of the task, to see again the evil that we are fighting, the joy that we have.

In Tim Winton's book 'Breath', two mates become addicted to the thrill and rush of surfing massive waves off the West Australia coast. In one telling passage, the narrator (now an old man) reflects:

More than once since then I've wondered whether the life-threatening high jinks that Loonie and I and Sando and Eva got up to in the years of my adolescence were anything more than rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath. (p.41)

We need 'life-threatening high jinks' in our journey of faith, at least at the start; hopefully punched in along the way. We need to put ourselves in harm's way, into the 'impact zone', in surfing lingo, and allow the waves to bucket us along. As the narrator in 'Breath' says:

I will always remember my first wave...How the wave drew me forward and I sprang to my feet, skating with the wind of momentum in my ears. I leant across the wall of upstanding water and the board came with me as though it was part of my body and mind. The blur of spray. The billion shards of light...I was intoxicated. And though I've lived to be an old man with my own share of happiness for all the mess I made, I still judge every joyous moment, every victory and revelation against those few seconds of living. (p.33)

Let me take this train of thought one step further. While we need both urgency and sustenance, urgency is the *first among equals*. Sustenance has no use if there is nothing urgent which needs sustaining. Sustenance is to urgency what food is to a body; only useful if there is a living body that needs it. It may seem that I am stating the obvious, but many people live their faith as if preparing for some future event. But that is not how anything real happens; we know this from our own experience, from the stories of the Bible and from the stories of our faith.

Moses responded to God's call to be his spokesman to Pharaoh, without any idea that this would lead to a 40 year leadership role of the people of God. Jesus' disciples responded passionately to him but with very wrong-headed ideas about what this meant for the long term. My most memorable experience of discipleship was living in a share house that extended hospitality to young people.⁴ For 2 weeks, we housed a young teenager who could not live at home. The welfare agency could have knocked us back because we were only 19-20 years old at the time, but we were eager and the need was urgent. We ended up caring for him for 3 years, and for some of us, this shaped a long-term vocation to care for the homeless.

Urgency is essential for sustenance to be useful at all. But once the journey has begun, urgency and sustenance are needed equally.

Siblings in the Same Bunk

Jesus counsels both urgency (*the kingdom of God is at hand; let the dead bury their own dead*) and sustenance (*build your house upon the rock; no general goes to war without counting the cost*). What are the consequences of focusing on one to the detriment of the other?

If we focus on urgency, on the desperate need to address pain, poverty & evil, and ignore sustenance, we flare like a match that burns out quickly as it is rushed through the air, failing to

³ I am not advocating an 'anything goes' approach. Elders need to caution against anything exploitative or truly unsafe. But that is a matter for pastoral flexibility, not cast-iron rules.

⁴ *Marchiori Road*, a household of the Blackburn Community Network (BCN), circa 1988-2001.

ignite gas or kindling. We become self-righteous; nothing is more important than our cause. We begin to exploit others to serve our cause. We begin to tell a story which centres on us and our achievements. If we focus simply on sustenance, on the strategies needed to keep going, and ignore urgency, we burn out slowly, like a match smouldering to the fingers as it is kept safely cupped in the hand; it also fails to ignite anything. We become self-protective; nothing is more important than our own needs. We ignore others' pain to preserve our wellbeing. We begin to tell a story which centres on us and our needs.

The careful reader will notice that the consequences of ignoring urgency or sustenance look suspiciously similar. That is because focusing on either urgency or sustenance to the detriment of the other is a form of selfism. Both *preserve a narrative that protects us*. Urgency tells a story that emphasises our *achievements*; sustenance tells a story that emphasises our *needs*. It will come as no shock that I propose keeping urgency and sustenance together in the same bunk, but what is the shape of that story? It begins with a personal narrative of call; or *vocation*. This is shaped by a Christ-centred narrative of *prayer and biblical reflection*, which is *embodied* in an acted narrative. All this is through *solidarity* with the narrative of others who are lost, in pain & poor, and with those who share the same road. Let us take these one at a time, in the knowledge that these are not fail-safe methods, but ways of prising open our lives to the breath of God.

Patient Endurance

If all we have is urgency, then we are like a sower who scatters seed with abandon, unmindful of their germination until there is no seed in our basket, and no green shoots in our patch. If all we have is sustenance, then we are like a gardener who faithfully pulls weeds, composts and waters but has planted no seed and will harvest no fruit.

When we meld these together, we can live with *patient endurance*, an embrace of both urgency and sustenance that extends our passion and breathes spirit into the motions of our faith.