

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

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There is a slogan which seems to speak to me. It cleverly consists of 10 words of two letters, "If it is to be, it is up to me." Now I know that I can't do everything even if I wanted to. No one can. Nonetheless, when a worthy task presents itself, I find myself thinking, "If it is to be, it is up to me." I can do it. Let me.

Often though, too often, the tasks seem so vast and impossible that I find myself asking in frustration and exasperation, "What can I do about it?"

Many times over my career, I've had situations when someone comes into the church looking for help. All ministers have those experiences and some of them stay with you, like this one. A woman who had come for help had just moved into town, had three children and had no idea where her husband was. She had no friends yet to help her. Her social assistance application had not yet been approved and she had only 54 cents to her name. "What can I do about it?"

I took her to the local food bank and gave her a few extra dollars from our Benevolent Fund to buy some perishables, such as milk, fruit and vegetables. While we were there a young couple with a child came in looking for food. She was pregnant, and he was on crutches. "What can I do about it?"

Last Sunday was Peace Sunday. I think every Sunday could and perhaps should be Peace Sunday. The world needs peace for it seems to be constantly in a time of war and violence. More broadly speaking, God's shalom, God's peace, is still a distant dream. In the Hebrew reading for todayⁱ, which we did not read, we are told through Isaiah to "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

Throughout his ministry Jesus reiterates over and over again that we must care about the marginalized and those treated unjustly. But when we look at the world around us, the neglect of the disabled, the persistence of poverty and hunger, the crises in our ecosystem, the prevalence of self-centredness and selfishness, the loneliness and lack of love, the anger and hatred, we feel helpless and hopeless. "What can I do about it?"

The answer for many of us, too many, is implicit in the tone of the question, - nothing. We think that we can't do anything about it. This results in three things.

First of all, there is great reluctance to face the problems of life and the problems of the world. Each of us has our own concerns which we are forced to confront. And so, to add other problems, the problems of others, seems too much to bear. We want to feel good about ourselves. We want peace within ourselves. We want to feel comfortable. We don't want to be reminded about the ugliness of our world and our role in that. "What can I do about it?" we ask. "Nothing!" we claim. "So leave us alone! Leave us at peace!" This is the preacher's dilemma. How do we comfort and challenge at the same time?

Secondly, when we are forced to consider the state of our world, we do it superficially. Week after week we come here to worship the God of Shalom, the God of peace and justice, the God of love. Week after week we confess our sins, our complicity in brokenness and injustice. We confess, but do we repent? Repentance means to turn around and to go another way. Repentance is admitting that you are lost, that you are in the wrong place, and then turning to walk with God to where God would have you be, to live as God would have you live.ⁱⁱ How many times we confess but continue to live in the same place in the same manner.

Thirdly, we attempt to find peace where peace is not to be found. I have a book entitled, *Hope for the Flowers*.ⁱⁱⁱ In this story, a Caterpillar named Stripe is unsatisfied with merely eating and getting bigger. So, he goes on a journey to discover more. He finds the world to be a wondrous place where he meets many

other fascinating creatures. But he still seeks more. He seeks satisfaction. One day he comes upon a column of caterpillars climbing over each other to reach the top, a caterpillar pillar. He begins to climb too. It's a painful struggle. He steps on others and is stepped on himself. When he nears the top, he realizes there is nothing there. There is no satisfaction and no peace. The climb has been for nothing. Peace, freedom and satisfaction have been sought in the wrong place in the wrong way.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector.^{iv} That means that he was a climber at the top of the caterpillar pillar. He got there by stepping on others, by extracting more taxes and keeping the leftovers for himself. That's how it was done in those days. So, he was rich. He had it all, except satisfaction. He had it all, except peace. But what was the source of his dissatisfaction? Certainly, he was unpopular and despised by people, but who cares? He had his own friends and his status, and his affluent lifestyle to shield him from the world's pain and to allow him to ignore the worries and problems of the world, even those he caused himself. He was a Jew, and so he could go to the temple to pray for peace of mind. He could even confess his sins, which without repentance wouldn't be too disturbing. Yet he was dissatisfied with himself and with this life. Why?

It was a gift from God, A reflection of the divine dissatisfaction. A revelation which unmasked false peace of mind and put it in a cosmic perspective.

I always remember my father's attitude towards stewardship. It might sound like bragging, but my father was one of the most generous givers in our church, although his income was on the low side of average. Yet he was dissatisfied with it because it was less than a tithe. Every year he pledged to God a portion of his monetary resources, and he kept that pledge, but he was dissatisfied with it. That, to my mind, is healthy. Dissatisfaction with yourselves, with your stewardship of you, your time, your talent, your treasure is good. It disturbs your complacency. It keeps you challenged and growing. It leads you back to the right path again when you find yourself in the wrong place.

This is what Zacchaeus was experiencing. The divine dissatisfaction with the stewardship of himself that led him to seek a greater peace than could be provided by the more-than-ample material comforts with which he had surrounded himself.

Then came Jesus, passing through. There were rumours about this Jesus. This was a great rabbi. He was attracting large and curious crowds. Perhaps this one could remove the dissatisfaction. Perhaps this one could make a difference. So, he went to catch a glimpse of him, to see for himself.

It was a risk, of course. Zacchaeus was small in stature and greatly disliked. So, venturing into the crowd would be risky. Many would delight in jostling the oppressor, giving him a bruise here and elbow there. But witness the turtle. The turtle doesn't get anywhere unless he sticks his neck out.

We too sense that perhaps this Jesus can make a difference in our lives. That's why we come here. We come to church to catch a glimpse of him. Yet we sense that if what we hear about Jesus is true, it is a risky action. We may have to confront our enemies within and the dangers without. But we stick our necks out hoping against hope for a word of peace, a word that will calm our inner turmoil, a word which satisfies.

Then miracle of miracles, he calls our name. "Come down, come down from your tree. Come down from your caterpillar pillar. Come down to Earth. I must dwell with you." Imagine the Master is going to dwell with you. What satisfaction at being called, centred out as one of his. The world may murmur against you. Sure, you're no saint. You're a sinner, but he has chosen you, unworthy as you are. Jesus has chosen you.^v

Here is the counterpart to divine dissatisfaction, divine acceptance. The Master has chosen you. Joy fills the heart when you hear your name called. You feel loved, comforted, at peace. A truly whole and complete life is not one filled with guilt, but rather one that is comfortable with who you are, comfortable in the knowledge that God loves you and has chosen you to be his person and to fulfill his ministry in the world. Within that peace the challenge is issued. The divine dissatisfaction which disturbed

us to seek a different way now motivates us to use that which has been accepted and chosen and blessed by God. It motivates us to full stewardship of ourselves, what we are and what we have, in order to bring this message of peace in word and deed.

In the presence of Jesus, these two elements were combined in the life of Zacchaeus. Divine dissatisfaction combined with divine acceptance to produce gracious action. "What can I do about it if it?" "If it is to be it is up to me." Zacchaeus gave half his wealth to the poor and restored what he had obtained by fraud to a much greater extent than was required by the law.^{vi} Zacchaeus was a changed and transformed person. A life that had devoted itself to its own gain at the expense of others now blossomed into a responsible life of giving and sharing.

In the story of Stripe the caterpillar, as he reached the top and realized the futility of his climb, he thought about a friend he had met along the way, another caterpillar named Yellow. They had enjoyed each other, but he had left her behind for something more as he began his climb. Now, as he reached the pinnacle of futility, he thought of her. Then suddenly she came to him, not as the yellow caterpillar she had been, but transformed into the golden butterfly she now was. She had discovered the secret of peace and satisfaction, and now she came to show him the way. Suddenly he realized that climbing was not the answer. The answer was flight. So, Stripe dismounted his pillar, gave himself up into the hands of God as he became a cocoon and what seemed risky, what seemed like death became rebirth as he too was transformed into a glorious butterfly. Now there was hope for the flowers as they flew spreading life and beauty across the face of the earth.

We who have had Jesus pass through our lives know from his example that there is a better way to live, a way of soaring freedom and joy, a way of peace with justice, a way that shares the benefits of life with everyone rather than stepping on others as we climb ever higher, a way which truly satisfies, a way which leaves us filled and fulfilled rather than empty. We are transformed, changed, reborn, resurrected people whose lives make a difference in God's world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Isaiah 11: 10-18.

ⁱⁱ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Saint Andrew Press, 1955 p. 245.

ⁱⁱⁱ Trina Paulus, *Hope for the Flowers*, Paulist Press, 1972.

^{iv} Luke 19: 1-10.

^v See I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, Eerdmans, 1978, p. 694.

^{vi} Barclay, *op.cit.*, p. 244. Marshall, *Ibid.*, pp. 697-698.