

## *God in Control but not Controlling?*



If you have read the above heading, and looked at the photo of the possum relaxing on the top shelf of our broom cupboard, you may be wondering how the two are connected. Well, if I think about my relationship with Possy, (as we call him), I do not control his behaviour. He comes and goes when he chooses. I think he knows my voice and perhaps my face as he relates with me by opening his eyes, looking at me, occasionally nodding his head, and then, closing his eyes, lowering his head between his paws, and returning to sleep. In a sense we respect each other.

I think Possy trusts me not to remove him, harm him, or even touch him. I like seeing him in the cupboard, even when, being nocturnal, he remains asleep all day as a ball of fur in the corner. This strange relationship with its vulnerability, trust and respect, I suggest, reflects just a little of our relationship with a God who is in control of us but not controlling us.

Recently I read an article in the July edition of *The Melbourne Anglican*, entitled, "Can a psychological idea speak into theology". The author, Dr Christa L. McKirland, is a lecturer in systematic theology at Carey Baptist College in New Zealand. She explained how psychology's understanding of our autonomy and need for relationships contributes to our well-being, and can help us to understand our relationship with God. Two of her sentences particularly spoke to me. They were, "God can be in control without being controlling", and,

“What we think of God affects how we relate to God, what we think of ourselves and how we live our lives”.

Starting with the second sentence, “What we think of God”, I have often been puzzled that although God loves us, God allows us to suffer and sometimes to act on our wrong decisions hurting ourselves and others. Also, that through suffering we can grow in compassion and love for others. This view of suffering is seen in the life of Jesus, who out of love for us became human, suffered and died, and through those actions achieved good for us. What is it about God’s love that allows or needs such suffering?

I suggest that God’s love, (God’s basic identification), when brought into conversation with the idea of God being in control of our lives but not controlling them, reveals the importance of freedom and respect in our relationship with God. God wants us to respond to God’s love with our love, but does not compel us to do so. When we can believe this, we learn to relate to others in a similar way. In last month’s reflection, I spoke of understanding “freedom” in Galatians 5:1 as enabling us to embrace new possibilities. In this reflection, freedom, along with respect, are shown as vital ingredients of God’s personal love for us.

If we look at events in the Gospels, we see that God did not control Judas but seemed to allow him to choose to betray Jesus. We might also ask, was Peter free to either deny or affirm knowing Jesus? Sometimes Jesus knew what was about to happen to others, but he did not intervene. The Samaritan woman Jesus respected and talked to at the well, (John 4), gradually became free from her past and able to believe and tell others that Jesus could be the Messiah.

God has created us as vulnerable individuals with the freedom to make choices. We can make these choices as people influenced by past experiences, relationships, knowledge, and by a belief and trust in a God of love and compassion.

If we are trying to follow Christ, we shall want to choose to respect and desire the well-being of others, but sometimes we fail to show God’s love to them, or to receive it from them. At these times, as Christians, we are reminded that God is always with us, and that God’s forgiveness is available to us if we are truly sorry and allow God to work in and through us. Relationships with God

and others can be healed and restored, even very damaged ones.

As well as turning to God to heal the damage our wrongs or failures have caused, we can ask God for guidance at any time. For example, after a Sunday Church Service, when we see someone standing alone, we can quickly pray for God's assistance and go to the lone person offering our friendship.

Alternatively, we could just turn aside to talk to our friends, and hope another person will act hospitably.

We do not ask God to control us but to be with us and help us. People who try to control all we do, or a controlling God, can make us into puppets which we are not. We are all God's loved, valued and unique people, and it is important for our uniqueness to be free from the control of others and encouraged to develop for the benefit of all. God respects and even trusts us to respond to God's love as free autonomous individuals working for good in co-operation with God.

God created our world out of love, and desires us to respond to God's love with love, and to share that love with others. In such loving relationships there are opportunities for the well-being of all—perhaps even possums! Also, I suggest, our experiences of God's love, in control but not controlling, reveal glimpses of life in the Kingdom of God.

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