

Christ Present in the Depths



The photo above is of a stick insect about 15cms long, resting on a bush near our back door. The insect was hard for us to see at first, but when gently touched, it moved. We thought we were just seeing a familiar bush, but when we looked more carefully, or at a greater depth, for me at least there was much more, it was the largest stick insect I had ever seen! I could only wonder how it ate and grew.

For us living in North Eastern NSW, the beginning of Lent this year was dominated by the activities of Tropical Cyclone Alfred. For some days, no one knew where the slow moving cyclone would go, or when its intensity would decrease. Those people living in its possible path began by evacuating and trying to save animals, houses and belongings from destruction. Although we at Kempsey were only on the edges of the path of the cyclone, the uncertainty of its movements and life made it difficult for us to relax and get on with daily work. It was not until sunshine at last appeared through the clouds that we could begin to consider what had happened, not just on the surface of our lives, but in its depths. For example, did we discover what was *really* valuable to us, and should be saved from flood waters? Were we aware of God's presence with us sharing our fears and suffering? Were we concerned for

others, human and non-human?

As Christians we believe we are members of the Body of Christ, the Church, but when, as part of God's whole loved creation we think of our identity in a deeper way, we are something more. Along with all humans, animals, plants and the whole universe we are also members of what can be called the Cosmic Body of Christ. As Richard Rohr writes, "A cosmic notion of the Christ competes with and excludes no one, but includes everyone and everything (Acts 10:15, 34), and allows Jesus Christ to finally be a God figure worthy of the entire universe." (The Universal Christ, 2019, p.7).

In this Cosmic Body of Christ we are all united to God and one another whether we know it or not, and Christ is present everywhere and in everything. Accepting this identity should influence how we relate to all others.

What if during Holy Week, you test this identity by silently and gently touching the leaf of a plant and the bark of a tree, respecting each for what it is, or by relating to a stranger. Then, perhaps later, reflecting on what you have experienced, begin to go deeper, seeing God's loving presence in nature or the person you met, and how that might direct you to accept, respect and reverence others. I will explain what I mean by using two recent experiences I have had.

The first involved a rat trap I had set in the evening to catch the rats living under the concrete floor of our fowl house. The next morning I had caught a small rat by its tail and a leg. It was not dead. I apologised to it, and then used another trap to kill it swiftly, before putting its body on top of a shed and calling a kookaburra. In seconds the kookaburra swooped down, and without stopping picked up the rat and flew up to a nearby branch of a tree. I saw he had the rat in his beak. He then flew off elsewhere to eat it.

My second experience, a few hours later, was when I went to town to do some shopping. I was standing in an aisle among the fruit and vegetables in a supermarket wondering what to buy next, when a woman bumped into me. She quickly apologised, moved on, stopped, and then returned to me. She explained that she tried to speak to someone each time she came to town and this set her up for the day. I told her why I was standing where I was. We had a short conversation, affirming the value of our own lives and those of each

other, before going on our separate ways.

When I reflected on these encounters, I realised that I first accepted and respected the others as they were. I was then able to go deeper, and become aware of Christ's presence in the rat, the kookaburra and the 'neighbour' I met in the shop, (and am called to love), as well as in myself and our relationships.

A third story, concerning Christ's relationship with humans, involves two carvings at the top of a pillar in a basilica in Burgundy, France, described by Pope Francis in his book, "Our Father". On one side of the pillar, Judas is hanging by a rope around his neck. On the other side, the risen Jesus Christ has taken down Judas' body, and placed him across his shoulders in the position of the lost sheep found and carried home by the Good Shepherd in Luke 15:5-6. Jesus is walking away slightly smiling.

A loving and forgiving Jesus Christ is depicted as entering the depths of death and bringing Judas out into new life. Love wins, not despair. I am sure that God's love does not give up on anybody, but instead shares with all creation, including Judas, the depths of their pain and grief, and then can bring them through their sufferings into the joy of resurrection life.

In our relationships with all others, human and non-human, mountains, trees and insects, we should be prepared to go deeper, and perhaps change from one way of seeing them, to seeing and respecting them in a new way, recognising Christ present in them, especially those broken. This is Christ's way of loving and uniting all God's creation in God, even a stick insect, that revealed to me something of the wonder of God!

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