Devotional Easter 7 2020 During the Covid-19 Pandemic

I was listening to Stephanie Higginson B.C. School Trustees Association and at some point in the interview she said, “all of us are having the ‘looks like, feels like’ conversation around kids going back into the classroom.”

And I thought, yup, that’s it isn’t it, we’re not so much interested in abstractions like “what is the ideal of society returning to normal as “what does normal feel like, what does it look like?”

At the same time, though we know that our feelings are more powerful than our rational side we are rightly cautious about putting too much emphasis on any one moment of feeling, or any one expression of emotion which we all know will quickly pass; those who end up most unhappy are those who think only of how they can make themselves happy.

So, when we raise the “looks like, feels like question,” we are more asking what does it “feel like over time” what is the characteristic temperament or mood of a certain way of living, the variety of experiences that, for instance, will be there for kids as they go back to the classroom in the midst of a pandemic and as they seek to negotiate going to the bathroom, hanging out with friends, interacting on the soccer field or in the science lab.

And so, it’s entirely legitimate to ask the question “what does it feel like, what does it look like to be a Christian?” And as I thought of that question I thought of the texts that go with the seventh Sunday of Easter and that also refer to the events and meaning of the Great Feast that falls within our Easter celebrations, a feast that falls forty days after Easter, the Ascension.

The absence of the Risen Christ’s glorified body from earth might not seem to hold much promise as a resource when it comes to answering these questions but let’s see.

If we look at the first part of the question “What does it feel like to be a Christian?” I will suggest to you that knowledge of Christ, and knowledge of the God, he calls Father, would be impossible without his Ascension.

As Luke tells it, Jesus “ascends to heaven” in a way that any Roman would understand, strange to say. When a Caesar died someone would be appointed to “have a vision that they had seen Caesar ascend on the clouds into the heavens and become a star/a god in the firmament.”

And so readers in the ancient world would be familiar with the imagery. But Luke subverts the meaning; for, in the case of Caesar, he would ascend to the realm of the gods never to be seen or heard from again.

Whereas the promise in terms of Jesus is precisely the opposite. Jesus ascends in order to be present to people in the power of God. This is the Holy Spirit! This is the meaning of the mystical union that Jesus talks about/prays about in our gospel reading.

The inner reality of the Ascension which appears to take Jesus further away is to draw him closer than ever. Yes, there is a real bodily absence but there is a closeness, indeed there is an opening to eternal life that would not be possible except for the fact that Jesus becomes one with the Father.

Is there confusion and ambiguity here, yes! That is partly the “feel,” if you will of being a Christian. We read a line like “when his glory is revealed” and we’re aware that the Ascension gives us a glimpse in advance of a great truth.

That truth is like the barely perceptible throbbing of a rhythm, like snatches of a barely heard melody that tickles our inner ear; that can be “moved to” that can be hummed only in halting ways and this is both glorious and frustrating.

What it feels like to be a Christian is to be privy to this secret. There is, if you will, a kind of truth to what the early gnostics claimed, a secret knowledge of God’s working in the world, the secret that Jesus is the world’s true Caesar, its true Lord, but we have no knock-down proof of this, no failsafe arguments, only snatches, only trust and faith

It is partly what we “feel” as part of Christian suffering. Of course many Christians suffer overtly, palpably, physically in persecution and economically or politically.

There is also suffering that comes from the stresses of contemporary life, some of it we ourselves cause, sometimes its cause is societal or global, like what we’re all experiencing right now. But there’s also a deep suffering, almost as unquantifiable as the snatches of rhythm and melody we pick up, that comes from living as a person who believes that the crucified Messiah is the world’s Lord in the midst of a society that obstinately lives by the rule of earthly violence, the craven pursuit of pleasure and wealth, ignoring the deep call of the eternal at almost every turn.

What it feels like to be a Christian is to try and hum the snatches of melody that come to us in Christ’s Resurrection even as the world’s music seeks to drown out that melody with it’s own raucous orchestra. But as we grow, we find that we can begin to sing, buoyed up by God’s own singing, the Love of God towards us, the forgiveness of Christ extending from us.

To reiterate, I’m not talking about “feeling” a particular emotion, or a series of emotions at a particular times, I’m “feeling for” (pun intended) that “sense” of “becoming a Christian” over the course of time, situated as we are in the secular West.

to become a Christian is to live less from laws and more into permissions: the freedom to become more loving, more forgiving, more helpful, more peaceful and joyful.

Here we also need to entertain the second question “what does it look like to be or to become a Christian?” The Ascension of Christ, allows us the “space” if you will see that Christ hasn’t simply vanished but that through his Spirit he is now reflected in and through us!

We are the Body of Christ and to become that body we need to learn to sing, to act, to act *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. We don’t need him hovering over us giving us directions over every area of our lives, we are given the dignity of “self-determination,” not apart from him, but “in him and through him.”

When we were created, God said that women and men were the image of God and Christ came to renew and remake that image-bearing call and vocation.

The Ascension reminds us of who Christ is but just as importantly it reminds us of who we are called to be and the essential permissions we are invited into!

I was listening to the chief medical officer of B.C. Dr. Bonnie Henry as she was being interviewed by *the Current’s* Matt Galloway and he was lauding her and bringing up her fame, the fluevog shoes that were made; there’s the ballad of Bonnie Henry that you can listen to; her face is up on murals etc. and he wanted to know what she made of all this fame.

And she said, of course what she would say, “I’m just the public face for so many others.” And of course, if all the front line workers wouldn’t do their jobs, if indeed the wider public didn’t follow her directives or resolutely decided not to practice, safety, calmness or kindness she would be infamous not famous.

With adjustments this is what it looks like to be a Christian, we laud our living Christ, we worship him, but that worship would fall flat if we fail to be his body, to actually hum the music and invite others to hum it; to resist the evil referred to in our second reading. We are the Christ the world sees, and this is the meaning of the Ascension and also it’s hidden power in the world!

I end this devotional by quoting Paul Thiessen, a lay theologian who along with his wife Pat Thiessen are front-line workers in this pandemic. In answer to a request for feedback here’s what he had to say:

This has been a difficult time for Pat and me especially as we have a home with two very vulnerable adults who either under or overemphasize the risks we are living amidst.

Paul then talks about how he and Pat are in a 24/7 care situation for those living with them. Then he says,

In your recent mid week update you asked us to reflect on what gives us hope.  As I think you know the Eucharist is really important for me and that is what I have been missing most in our “new normal”.   Several weeks ago you gave a devotional on the Emmaus Road narrative where you made a small statement that in my view lies at the heart of the story.  Without hospitality Christ would never have been revealed and the Emmaus story would never have been recorded.   I have long believed that the Emmaus story is at its core a Eucharist story.  Where and how do we find the risen Christ?

In order to keep one of our adults occupied Pat and her have started baking almost daily and I continue to make large meals.  But we cannot eat all that is produced in our kitchen and so that product of our collective labour is finding its way into homes around our community including both of my brothers.  And without planning it, it seems we are building social connections while remaining physically distant.

Perhaps, there are more ways to “be the body of Christ” than we have imagined. Perhaps it is hard times that force us into new ways of imaging what it means to be church and more specifically for us to be the living resurrected Body of Christ.   I recently came across this poem on facebook and it has brought to consciousness the embers that were smouldering in my soul  - that just as we are finding new ways of worshipping together we can also find new ways on sharing communion together.

An Order for Communing in a Pandemic
by Anonymous

She took a loaf of bread,
broke it and gave it,
half to the hungry, the poor, the millions
whose gap-toothed pantries
are emptying,
dwindling sand racing
through the widening neck of an hourglass
and she felt the weight
of a sacrament pressing
into her soul
as the body and blood of Christ
spilled out of doors,
into streets,
into homes,
flowing as freely,
as slick and messy,
as uncontrolled,
as it did from his own tortured body,
as if God really could be present
everywhere and in everything.

Thanks for all your work in finding new ways for us to continue being a viable and vibrant community in Christ.

In that I am only the “priest” if we are, together, the body of Christ.

In, with and through Christ!