**Stop, Look and Listen!**



Warning signs are so commonplace these days that we may not even notice them. Nevertheless, they call us to pay attention and remain very good advice, particularly if we are about to cross any sort of line. This sign by the railway track in our garden came to mind when I read a book by Frederick Beuchner,*The Remarkable Ordinary*, in which a whole section is titled, “Stop Look and Listen to God”. Whilst this sign warns of potential danger, it applies equally well to all of life as it is so easy for us to sleepwalk past the many small miracles along our way.

It is an encouragement to look beneath the surface of our perception and to see more deeply. To notice and appreciate what is wonderful and of grace in the midst of our everyday existence. To look behind what we expect to see, or what’s on our mind, and see what is remarkable, so that we do not miss the treasure buried in our field.

As a writer, Beuchner says that books are saying the same thing: “Stop and pay attention!” If we allow ourselves to be drawn into and inhabit for a while the alternative worlds created for us by an author, they can actually help us to stop. These worlds may just be frivolous distraction but equally might lead us to something richer, more real, more immediate and more shimmering than what is otherwise going around in our heads.

Other forms of art share this potential. Beuchner recounts seeing a Rembrandt portrait of an old woman in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He comments that her face is just so ordinary and unremarkable that if you saw her in the supermarket queue you wouldn’t give her a second glance. An unremarkable face, but also a face that Rembrandt saw as so remarkable that he invested his time, skill and materials to paint her portrait. And here she is, 400 years later, both an anonymous ordinary face and a masterpiece in oils by Rembrandt, looking out from a prestigious museum wall and framed in a way that says to everyone: “look and see!” And if we do see how remarkable she is, she becomes unforgettable. Beuchner reflects that for him, somehow that woman’s face becomes all faces, and all faces are somehow contained in that painting.

It seems to me that Jesus is saying something similar when he says “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They do not labour or spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon is all his splendour was not dressed like one of these (Matthew 6:28-29). This and many of Jesus’ parables invite us to consider; to reflect and be surprised by what the everyday of our lives and the natural world can reveal. Consider lost sheep, lost coins, sowing seeds, bread dough, prodigal sons, weddings, tiny seeds and big trees, finding treasure in fields. Jesus’ invites all who hear him to stop, look and listen, to become more deeply aware of the remarkable presence and love of God in the unremarkable ordinary of our lives. We are given the ability to walk with God because we are loved, but God’s love doesn’t rest on our walking. As theologian Jurgen Moltmann once said, “We are not loved because we are beautiful and good, we are beautiful and good because we are loved”.

As we approach our time of silence this evening, we enjoy a fresh invitation to pause our thoughts, distractions and worries, to stop, look and listen for God. To be at rest and gently hold ourselves, our days and our lives in the loving gaze and presence of God. And as we do so, become more deeply aware that we are seen by the One who sees us because he loves us, and loves us because he sees us.

**To lead us into silence**

A few verses from Matthew 6:26,28-29:

‘Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that Solomon in all his splendour was not dressed like one of these.’

And a few words from Frederick Beuchner, *Here and Now*:

‘Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.’

**To lead us from silence.**

A prayer for the end of the day by Henri Nouwen

All loving Father,

Today I have glimpsed You in the faces of the people I’ve seen,

Caught the sound of Your voice in their laughter and cries of pain,

Touched Your hands in the warmth or coldness of their hands.

I have sought You in the ups and downs of my heart,

In loneliness and love, in sorrow and joy,

In the midst of my inner turmoil and in quiet moments of peace.

And yet my soul is still restless and my heart still longs for more.

Let me rest now in the quiet of this night

And remember that as much as I seek you,

You are seeking me even more and hold me in your heart

As Your beloved child.

Amen.