

Fulfilled or A Little Bit Emptied

There is a lot of talk about being fulfilled by God. Living a fulfilled life. Being filled with God's Spirit. In Christian circles here and in N America in general it is deemed good to be fulfilled. "He lived a full life." they say approvingly at funerals. And I agree, it is good to have lived a full life and fulfilled all those empty places in your soul and heart.

But being fulfilled isn't always a good thing.

My first backpacking camping trip was made painful and miserable for me because I had fulfilled my backpack. It was like carrying a horse. I had just thought of all the things I might need, and brought them. There wasn't a cubic centimeter of air in that bag.

Being fulfilled after a special meal, like Christmas turkey and stuffing. Groaning with fullness you are offered a slab of Christmas cake, but there is no room! And Christmas cake is my favourite! Arrrgh!

There is something good about being empty.

It is said that the most important thing about a pottery bowl is the emptiness within it. Think on that for a moment.

It is its emptiness that allows you to fill it, with soup, or ice cream, or apples.

This emptiness occurs all over Holy Scripture.

The whole of Jesus' life is a process of emptying, until, on the cross, empty of friends, empty of power, empty of energy, empty even, finally, of a sense of God's presence, he becomes empty of life itself and dies. The cross, this place of emptiness, is, for us a symbol of the power of God. Think on that for a moment.

So Paul, in the second reading talks of emptiness. It is not those filled with knowledge, nor those filled with political power, wealthy influence or social standing to whom the Gospel has been revealed. No, Paul says, but to those who are empty the Spirit of Christ comes. It is foolishness, this Gospel of ours, in the eyes of those filled with education and philosophy. It is weakness this Gospel to anyone who has guns or money or influence.

But it is in emptiness and weakness and foolishness that the Spirit of Jesus goes forward.

So look at the Gospel, the Beatitudes.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted."

Evangelical preachers talk about blessing as healings, or riches, or success. Things going well. Things filling us up full. Not these beatitude things. This emptiness.

But what would it be like to be empty?

To be empty is to be vulnerable. An empty gas tank means you must ask for help. An empty purse means you must beg for food. An empty heart means you need to cry. An empty mind means you

do not know all the answers. An empty future means someone else must lead you. An empty plan means you must work it out as you go along.

Being empty means being out of control, which means being at risk. It means not knowing what will come next.

Some of you, I know, get irritated with me because I do not plan far enough ahead and with adequate detail. People planning schedules find it hard when I ask them to leave gaps just in case something or someone unexpected turns up. People ask me what will be happening in the next year at Grace and I tell them that we will have to wait and see. It is not just that I am a hopeless organizer. It is that I am trying to keep a degree of emptiness. It is through the cracks, as someone once said, that the light gets in.

And if you look back at your life, when did the changes happen that have made you who you are? Was it when everything went perfectly to plan? No, I think not. It was when things went terribly astray. When the breakdown happened, or the marriage failed, or the plant closed, or something else caused you to stop.....

The Prophet Micah, in words of ringing simplicity and truth says this to our attempts to be in control, to be on top of everything, to be fulfilled like bulging shopping bags...

“What does the LORD require of you
but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?”

I am not saintly enough to be completely empty, living day by day in utter dependence upon God. And I suspect that if I gave away everything, God would be cross with me for being in constant need of help when he had set me up with enough to look after myself anyway.

So, I will not become like a wandering monk.

But I must stay less than rich, a little poor in spirit.

I must not be so insulated that I never mourn, or get hurt in love.

And though it feels safe to be strong, I need to be a little meek.

And unless I let the horror and pain of the world rest in me, how can I ever really hunger and thirst for righteousness?

Those who need mercy are best at being merciful.

And the pure in heart tend to be a bit transparent to others.

The war makers are the armed forces, the peacemakers are the disarming, undefended but truthful. And they tend to be those who are persecuted.

So it is to this emptiness that Christ's Way leads us.

And this is good, because it is only when we are empty and open and have no strength or rights or a sense that God owes us, only then, that God comes and saves us, redeems us, lifts us up into his life and love.

So put away your power, if only a little bit. Don't trust in your strength, entirely. Let your future be a little unforeseen and ragged at the edges. Make spaces in your timetables for surprises. Be a little cracked, so the light can come in. Give God a foothold

God never asks for perfect. He asks for justice, mercy and humbleness of heart. Even, especially, the empty can have these.