

Lent 5. Overcoming Self Sufficiency. Isaiah 43.16-21

Often at Mainly Music, as I watch the mums & their little ones interact, I have to smile. I see things that I suspect are the experience of parents the world over.

For instance, mum is in something of a hurry to get out the door, and hunts around for the child's shoes which have been discarded. As she kneels to put them on her toddlers feet, there is the defiant cry "ME do it!" So mum sits back patiently while the child struggles to put the shoes on - of course on the wrong feet. Mum manages to get the child to swap them over, then reaches forward to fasten them. Petulant cry, "NO! ME do it!" The child then painstakingly fastens each velcro tab while mum sneaks a look at her watch. Finally said child is ready and they walk hand in hand out the door.

Sound familiar? There is something firmly built into us, right from our very youngest years, to strive for independence and self sufficiency.

Do you think self-sufficiency or self-reliance is a good thing?

Self-sufficiency is very necessary in our world, isn't it? It's something we encourage in our children as they grow; it's something tradesmen encourage in their apprentices; it's something that developed countries encourage in developing countries.

Self-sufficiency is to be desired, isn't it? - Reaching that stage where we've studied, watched and learned; where we've experimented and succeed; where we've finally gained sufficient skill and confidence in an area to go it alone without anyone's help.

I'm sure we'd all agree that self-sufficiency is a good and healthy goal to strive for. However there is one area in which it is not always a good thing- and that area concerns our spiritual life.

Is it a good thing to be spiritually self-sufficient? Let's explore that question a little.

We mustn't confuse maturity with self-sufficiency. There is a difference between spiritual maturity and spiritual self-sufficiency. We should certainly all strive to become spiritually mature. In Peter's first letter, he encouraged his readers with these words: "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."

And then in our second reading today, Paul says, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." We are encouraged in the scriptures to grow and mature in our faith; to pursue holiness; and to seek to understand the mind of God.

Spiritual maturity is not the same as spiritual self sufficiency. Spiritual self sufficiency is that tendency we all have at times to leave God on the fringe of our lives and tackle what life throws at us in our own strength.

Maybe we even think this is admirable. “I don’t want to bother God with my small problems,” we say. “I don’t want to whinge, I want to be thankful,” we say. And we charge ahead, believing that we are pleasing God by being self sufficient and independent of him. But this is not what God wants of us!

This self sufficient, independent attitude of heart brings with it a major problem. We begin to develop a type of tunnel vision. We find that as we look at the earthly plane of our existence and all its problems, we also look on that same earthly plane for our solutions. We can only see those things that are obvious to us; those things that are part of our experience; those things that are right in front of us. And it severely limits our possibilities!

In the Isaiah reading from today we read,

“This is what the LORD says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.”

The focus in that short passage is on God himself, and *his* ability, not on the problems the Israelites were facing. Isaiah reminds his readers that it was God who ‘made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters...’ What he was referring to there, was the time Israel was running for their lives from the pursuing Egyptians, only to find themselves blocked by the Red Sea. Do you remember the story? Moses encouraged them to look to God. Then he raised his staff – and WOAHH – the sea parted for them! Now I bet *that* hadn’t come up as a possible solution in their planning meetings!

“See, I am doing a new thing”, says the Lord. “Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.” If we don’t take the trouble to bring our concerns and problems to God; if we persist in solving our own problems, we can MISS the new thing that God wants to do in our lives and in our midst!

Again, the reference is to God’s miraculous provision in the wilderness. The Israelites were out of water. They were parched with thirst, but they were in the middle of the desert. What were they to do? Should they call a meeting of the elders and discuss where they could sink a bore in the desert? Should they choose a couple of teams to scout for the nearest oasis and report back? Should they experiment with how to collect water through condensation?

They would all have been reasonable things to do in their situation to try and solve their problem – but this wasn't where the solution lay. The solution lay with God. He did a “new thing” – something they would never have expected! God had Moses draw water from a rock in the middle of the desert!

Life throws us all sorts of difficulties. From time to time we all face problems with our relationships, our health, our livelihoods, our church. Now we can - and often do - battle on in our own strength, drawing on our own experience, and coming up with our own solutions – and we can do okay.

But alternately, we can overcome this self sufficient attitude by turning back to God – repenting of our self-centredness and narrow vision – and praying, “Lord, please show me *your* solution to this problem.” And then, continuing in faith, watch for the *new thing* God may choose to do in our life.

Remember the wedding at Cana? The night was young, but they'd run out of wine. In that culture this was a huge problem for the host. It would have been a source of great shame and embarrassment for the family. But what could be done? The markets were closed. And they couldn't serve the water! It was an impossible situation. There seemed no way to avoid the shame - until Mary brought the problem to Jesus' attention. The solution was out of left field, wasn't it? -A miraculous change of state of the water itself. Who would have thought it possible?

God's solutions are always creative, and often completely blow our minds. But so often we don't give him the opportunity to bring his creativity to bear on our own problems. We persist in 'not bothering him'. We battle on, making do with second rate solutions.

It's very easy to look at a situation, and see all the potential problems. Of course, there is nothing wrong with caution and good old common sense – and what the business world calls “Due Diligence.” In fact it is a sound Biblical principle to be good stewards of what God has entrusted to us.

But we also need to keep in mind some of these Bible stories that push us beyond what we can predict with our calculators, or see with our eyes – such as Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, or God bringing water from a rock; or Jesus turning a jar of water into the best wine!

If we can allow these stories to inform our decisions as much as our earthly thinking does and let them kindle our faith, we'll find that God can take an ordinary situation or a difficulty we think is seemingly insurmountable and bring out of it something we might never have dreamed of!

Our God is a creative and innovative God – that’s where we get our own earthly creativity from. When we are willing to turn a difficulty over to God, he is able to take hold of it and transform the problem into something good and positive, often providing a solution we would never have thought of!

Are we wrestling with anything this morning? Is there a dead end or impasse in our lives – something we can’t seem to get past? Are we lacking imagination or heart to face a situation in our lives? Then let’s be encouraged by these words of Paul, found in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus:

Eph 3:20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.