

Opening Music: Gotta Serve Somebody, Instrumental. Music: Bob Dylan

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to Part Two of our Good Friday Podcast, which is a personal reflection in music and story of what I think it means to stand at the foot of the cross today, to embrace the mystics life, and that in its simplest form, is to embrace the sacred in all people and all matter. And this, of course, is open to all people, regardless of formal religious inclinations, or lack thereof.

Still, there is, on this Good Friday, an opportunity to contemplate the unique mystic tradition within the Christian faith. For standing at the foot of the cross has a particular meaning within our faith story, though the principles within it are universal.

I am Rev. Candice Bist and along with my husband Bruce Ley, we serve the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge in Southern Ontario, which is a part of the United Church of Canada.

We are, all of us, living through uncertain times. But I am hoping that during this time when traveling out and about is ill advised, your spirit will calm, and there will be time to consider the larger matters. We don't often do that in our hurly burly lives. But here now, is an opportunity.

May the music and thoughts here offered grant you a time of rest and reflection.

Musical Interlude: Near the Cross Instrumental

First Reflection:

To begin, I offer as call to worship and opening prayer, a viewing and meditation of one who stood at the foot of the cross in our passion story. He was a soldier, a centurion. He is the literary creation of the writers in three of the gospel tellings, no doubt a composite character allowing us to see that some of those who behaved badly within our story, both at the time, and in times after, had regrets, had new thought arise, perhaps saw things differently, perhaps would have done things differently had they the chance to do them again.

The centurion, and his plight, has held my attention since I was a child. He is as real to me as any person that lived in the flesh. There is a large painting that hangs in our dining room, and when Bruce painted it, he called it, Spaceship. But when I looked at it, I saw the Centurion in his helmet, and Bruce, ever gracious with his gifts, has allowed me to re name the painting and will not sell it, for he knows it has great meaning to me. He watches over me. He stands in solidarity with me. Like all wounded healers, he knows his own weakness, and is thus, always sympathetic to mine.

Here is my thought poem for the Centurion, the painting, and all of us.

The Centurion

He weeps, the Centurion, for all he could not see.....

and when, too late, he realized his error.

*I weep too, for these many years later,
my blindness is just as brutal.*

*I like he am covered in the froth and fleck of the blood
of the forgotten and maligned, those left to die
alone, affliction branding their spirit
with the hot poker of chance,
the salt on their wounds our contempt,
the vinegar our tuned backs,
and their final desolation our collective murmured condemnation.*

*We can only hope our mingled tears will wash us,
if not free and clean,
at the least fresh enough for new beginnings.
Where else is there to turn but back upon ourselves,
hearts broken open with remorse
softened with humility,
walking, at last, in companionship,
with a god whose tears mingle with our own.*

*Weep then, dear Centurion,
and I will comfort you,
and you me.*

*In tears we gather strength.....
.....and soldier on.*

Musical Interlude

Reflection

To stand at the foot of the cross, is to stand in solidarity with all those who are maligned, all those who suffer injustice, all those broken by their burdens, all those dying from neglect

Sometimes, that is a person outside us. And sometimes, that person is us.

Either way, to stand at the foot of the cross, is to stand in solidarity with the sadness, the dismay, the despair, the horror, the terror, the confusion, to witness the reality of the suffering.

It is not a place of fixing, nor even changing, though certainly social justice issues may emerge from the discipline of solidarity that require action and energy. But first, before any kind of movement, there must be a time of comradeship with the pain, allowing the contemplative spirit to open our eyes to the struggle.

Over the years that Bruce and I have written music together, suffering people have come to visit us through our music and our art. They come uninvited, floating, or sometimes barging, into our consciousness to emerge fully formed upon a blank canvas or piece of paper. Though even then, they remain a mystery, at the same time they have infiltrated our family of thought.

Sometimes they arrive with a tune fully formed, and gift themselves as offering. They stand there begging to be heard, asking for their voice to be brought forth. And we try, as best we can to honour them.

Sometimes they are there in the morning waiting with their sorrow – no melody, no sound, no words to express their inner struggle. And you have to sit with them, waiting, waiting, hoping that you will be able to capture some essence, fearing they will flee before you have accomplished the task.

There are so many of them. And I would gather them all to me if I could. But of course, I cannot. But what I want is for you to see them, to notice them, to be aware of them, because they are all around us. And in truth, they are you and they are me and they are all of us, and in the Christian tradition, we would say, they are Christ also, waiting for us to see them.

To stand at the foot of the cross is to stand with them.

To walk by them is to allow their personal crucifixion to go unseen, dishonoured.

Here are three of our visitors. Perhaps you will recognize them, perhaps they are you, perhaps you have past them by.... but maybe not next time....

Musical Interlude

Introduction to ‘Aint There Ever Any End

Sometimes, trouble seems to drag behind a person like a soiled shirrtail.

Musically this song has been arranged a dozen different ways. In the end Bruce found this up-tempo interpretation for a lyric that is decidedly not, and somehow, strangely, we liked it best of all.

The original track was heavier and came to me with the worn-out luggage of a man down on his luck, humbled by his mistakes and mired in regret, yet having experienced the flickers of wisdom that often emerge from ugly living.

He showed up muddy, soiled, and smelling of dank marshes and labour. I loved him from the moment he arrived. I knew his secrets would never be mine. Some losses leave their mark upon a person and can never be shared. There is a kind of sacredness to patient desolation, a priestly bearing that makes of each movement a ballet of sorrow.

He is not in the habit of letting others too close. But I wrapped my prayer for him in the paper aeroplane of this song and sent it gently over his shoulder when he was deep in thought.

And just to make sure it flew the right way, I placed a kiss on the right wing.

I hope it eased his burden. I do. I do.

Ain't There Every End. Music: Bruce Ley, Lyrics: Candice Bist

Introduction to 'It's Dark'

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a freedom fighter as a person who takes part in a resistance movement against an oppressive political or social establishment. The term is, however, a relativistic term, given by those who would agree that the freedom a person is fighting for, is in fact, a worthy pursuit. Those who do not agree with the pursued freedoms, may see a so-called freedom fighter as an insurrectionist, or in today's language, a terrorist.

Jesus was a freedom fighter, well, to those who followed him he was. But of course, to the Roman Empire, he was an insurgent, thus the punishment of crucifixion – a tortured humiliation, a public viewing of what happens to all those who oppose the status quo, the power of the ruling empire.

But Jesus was not a freedom fighter – or an insurgent – in the way that these matters were seen at the time, or these many years later.

He was, like many before and after him, concerned with the inner freedom of the soul, and following that, the intellect, knowing that once a person, or group of people, had come to understand their innate belovedness – and by extrapolation the belovedness of all people – they would be strong enough to stand before all those who tried to oppress, control, or confine the richness of this world that must flow freely.

Jesus was a freedom fighter taking part in the resistance movement against our own oppression, external and internal with the full confidence that once this was achieved, it could topple any regime, any economy, any political power.

Those with the courage to take up this work of the spirit, continue today, though, it is a bloody business.

Real Freedom Fighters are most often found in the combats of ordinary dress. They are all around us.

When I was in seminary, I travelled regularly on public transportation to the city through the dark winter months. Still half asleep in the murky early morning light I'd be jostled through the portal of the bus door to be transported with other strangers into the big smoke we call Toronto. As we travelled through the darkness, the bus's instrument panel would blink out its carnival lights as personal computers opened and closed allowing Tinkerbell snippets to sparkle and trail throughout the bus. And I would imagine that as we travelled, great swaths of coloured ribbons trailed behind us, densely covered in the endless stories that belonged to those of us inside that magical bus.

The secret lives of all those I pass during the day touches me. I see their faces, hear their voices, watch them interact, and all the while wonder at the universe of stories stacked in neat files in the library of their minds - some marked 'do not open.'

In my own life, there have been times it has taken every ounce of courage just to dress myself and head out the door for the simplest of errands. I know I cannot be alone in this. Which is why when someone in front of me is taking a long time at some portal - a cash register or door of a bus or stop sign - struggling in some way, my heart lurches. And I wonder at their courage, at their story, at their unique contribution to the whole. And I wonder too at what part of their internal tale they are currently working through.

This man struggles perhaps with some malady we have named – addiction, depression, despair – but mostly he struggles to live out his own story, to battle the demons that surround him, to find a way to exist in wholeness, even as past traumas and present anxieties snatch at his coat sleeve.

Next time you are out milling about, you might notice him. He's a real Freedom Fighter. As are we all, when we fight to become who we are.

It's Dark, Music: Bruce Ley, Lyrics: Candice Bist

Introduction to Hard to Hang On

Around the time this tune arrived on my desk I was pondering a lengthy conversation I had had with a friend who had worked in the sex trade. She had lived on the street as a young person, having left a volatile, chaotic home, the trading of sexual favours for cash a natural outcome. It was, she told me, a dangerous, murky life. All these years later, its mark is still upon her.

At the same time, there was much public debate about the legalization of prostitution in our country. And in the life of my local community, there were too many suicides of young people. Somehow this all melded together into my imagining a young prostitute torn between her current life and the life she desires, and the equally powerful pull to end life altogether. Like a butterfly that has been pinned through the mid-section, she feels immobilized, longing to move away from where she is, but seemingly unable to fly forward toward something new. And in the midst of her quandary lurks the ever-present possibility of giving herself over to the appealing numbness of death.

It is not an uncommon posture – trapped between what is and what might be.

In mindfulness, we might recognize this stance more often. It is all around us. So often we hold it ourselves.

Sometimes to tip the balance one way or the other, all that is required is a hand offered in a gesture of friendship and welcome.

Hard to Hang on Music: Bruce Ley, Lyrics: Candice Bist

Introduction to Can I Lay My Head Upon Your Shoulder

Where do you go, when you feel you can't go on?

I have so often wondered about the Mary's – Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of Jesus. Where did they go when their hearts were broken? Where did they go for comfort?

Where do any of us go when we are bereft? Hopefully, the Marys had shoulders to cry upon. Hopefully, you have a shoulder to cry on, if not a physical one, then a prayerful one where you can rest your head and come to feel whole again.

And that is such a small thing to offer another, is it not, though it might shift the axis of whole world without us knowing? To offer someone a place to cry, a place to hold their sorrow, a place to try and find their way through – that is a grand sharing.

I am hoping if you are given the opportunity to offer a shoulder to cry upon, you will not refuse it.

In our particular time, that shoulder may come in the simple form of a telephone call, or a note, or a prayer, or a remembrance. Do not refuse to give it. It will be your very own sanctification.

Music: Can I Lay My Head Upon Your Shoulder, Music: Candice Bist, Lyrics: Candice

Closing Reflection

I will leave you with a meditation, inspired by another painting that Bruce did some years ago and our rewriting/reworking of a classic hymn from the 19th century.

The painting of which I speak, hangs not in our dining room, but in that of our oldest son Michael. It is entitled: The Scales of Justice. It is large with many layers of red paint, the scales broad brush strokes of white.

It has been said by some spiritual thinkers that the cross and the crucifixion of Jesus was perfect justice, and this seems so to me. Because perfect justice comes continually towards us in the form of new alignments, new shifts in thinking that hopefully bring humanity collectively to a higher place, a more benevolent understanding of itself.

We are, in a way, living through a time of crucifixion, a time when old ways will not suffice, and yet the new way, or at least the particularities of it, are unknown.

There will be a lot of standing at the foot of the cross. There will, hopefully, be many offers of a shoulder to cry on and places to seek comfort – not in distractions, though they have their place – but in gentle conversation, in open ended wonderings, and above all, in grace, which is unmerited gift we are to give and receive, with generosity.

Musical Interlude

Closing Reflection

Our good and our evil are but the same,

balanced at different points along the taut line of life

that holds us in tension.

Careening to one side we lavish the world with our generous spirit,

then slipping back we gather everything to us in parsimonious hoarding.

Like children on a teeter-totter we fling ourselves into the air, higher, higher,

squealing with delight at the power we yield.

Then we crash to the ground throwing another higher, higher,

worshiping their accomplishments while grovelling in our so-called sin

in the arid playground dust created by so many little feet before us.

Our view is of opposites, categories, and separation.

It is a faulty viewing.

It is all a shared continuum,

our gracious intentions but the extrapolation of our fault lines,

our supposed error, but the extension of our innate goodness.

Where we are gifted, in exaggeration, we are disgraced.

Be gentle then, little ones, and keep your balance.

Purest joy is not in riding high but moving in sweet harmony with the daily life that is given.

We are not to charge against ourselves in combat,

but walk sweetly hand in hand on our soul's journey,

offering peace and justice to all.

Closing Music: *Oh, Jesus I Have Promised* Music: Angel's Story, Original Lyrics: John Erenst Bode, 1816. Arranger, Bruce Ley 2020