

Garbage In, Garbage Out
All Age Worship - Cashmere Presbyterian Family Service - Sunday 11 October 2020
Rev Hamish Galloway

Readings: Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4: 4-8

My daughter has just arrived back from London and is in 14 days quarantine in a Christchurch hotel. She reports that the food is great. I spoke to her this morning and she had just eaten waffles with bacon, caramelised bananas and yoghurt! According to Megan, every meal has a naughty option and a healthy option – this morning they treated themselves to the naughty option!

I think we all know that same choice! Sometimes I choose to have a cooked breakfast, including bacon and sausages - both things that I know are not good for me, yet taste delicious at the time of eating. Yet I also know that this kind of breakfast leaves me feeling kind of stodgy and lethargic for most of the rest of the morning – garbage in, garbage out! I fill up with this stuff and my output is hampered. On the other hand, a good healthy breakfast of muesli, fruit and yoghurt leaves me energised and ready to go! I have heard the same said of what we listen to in the morning. A diet of negative news can leave us agitated, whilst playing upbeat positive music is good for our mental health as we go into the day!

The same principle applies to our thinking and our spirituality. If we fill our minds and our souls with negative things, we will get a negative result! If we fill our minds with good and noble, praiseworthy and positive things, we get a good result! Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, is really clear about what the positive outcome is – it is peace. He gives it twice in quick succession as the outcome of right thought and action (v7 and v9). And he is clear that this kind of peace has a divine dimension, a giftedness from God, “it surpasses human understanding”.

Let’s unpack that a little:

- the Greek word for peace here is eirēnē (from which we get the lovely name Irene)
- it was a common Jewish word of farewell – as you go from me, I wish you peace!
- it is closely connected to the Hebrew word ‘Shalom’
- there are a number of aspects or qualities this word picks up:
 - wholeness – the idea of all the essential elements of our lives (spiritual, emotional, physical and social) are working together in harmony.
 - quietness
 - rest
 - absence of conflict (what we call ‘peace’, but the point here is that the Greek and Hebrew words contain much more depth of meaning than the English word peace). This carries the idea of good relationships with God, others, the environment!

A good way of exploring the meaning of any concept is to ask the question, “what, then, is the opposite?”

The opposite of wholeness is disconnection, as in the times when we feel strangely disjointed and kind of mixed up!

The opposite of quietness is noise, loudness, as in “I seem to be surrounded by so much noise, I can hardly think!”

The opposite of rest is a restlessness of soul, it is a feeling of discontent and a mind that feels anxious and makes us tired and worn out.

The opposite of peace is conflict, as in “I feel so conflicted in my thoughts, in my soul, in my relationships.”

A key idea in both passages is about filling up on the things that bring peace and wellbeing, rather than those things that still leave us feeling largely empty!

Our two passages give us graphic illustrations of the negative and the positive here.....

Firstly the negative: the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). The story of the Exodus continues. Remember that these Israelite people were slaves in Egypt and were graciously and miraculously delivered by God across the Red Sea. Remember that they were hungry and thirsty in the desert and God miraculously and graciously provided them with food and water! Remember that God had raised up just the right leader, Moses, to keep them focused on worshipping and trusting in God, although they were surrounded by nations that worshipped all sorts of glittering but false images! Behind this is the oft repeated idea that we have with us a God sized space that only God can fill. It is a space tinged with eternity, therefore to fill it with anything less than eternal is futile. Anything material rather than spiritual will not even touch the sides, it will leave us feeling spiritually empty.

In this passage, we read how Moses is up the mountain in special communion with God on behalf of these people. He is delayed by this intense engagement with God. The people quickly turn from Yahweh for their spiritual needs to the more tangible ‘golden calf’, an image widely worshipped in the surrounding nations and cultures! It was glittering, tangible and concrete compared to the invisible and mysterious Yahweh! And it has become an image for the temptation in our present culture to worship money, things, materialism! It is a temptation that is pulling in people by the millions, just as the Israelites almost to a person went with the golden calf. Even Aaron found himself swayed by the crowd! So they hold wellbeing festival in front of an image that will leave them well short of the spiritual wellbeing that comes with relationship with the God who bring a deep spiritual peace.

God calls the people perverse and stiff-necked:

- perverse – to make choices they know are not good for them. In this case, to abandon the very God who had so graciously and miraculously been working with them towards freedom!
- Stiff-necked – to be proud and stubborn! They thought they knew best, abandoning the very directions of their God and creator. Adam and Eve were stiff-necked when they took the forbidden fruit – this is an original sin!

I think about the headlong rush towards hedonistic materialism in our world today based on a lie that herein lies the secret of happiness!

In a special edition of Time Magazine in 2016, the science of happiness was explored and there is this telling quote:

The new science of happiness starts with a simple insight: we’re never satisfied. “We always think if we just had a little bit more money, we’d be happier,” says Catherine Sanderson, a psychology professor at Amherst College, “but when we get there, we’re not.” Indeed, the more you make, the more you want. The more you have, the less effective it is at bringing you joy, and that seeming paradox has long bedevilled economists. “Once you get basic human needs met, a lot more money doesn’t make a lot more happiness,” notes Dan Gilbert, a psychology professor at Harvard University and the author of *Stumbling on Happiness*. Some research shows that going from earning less than \$20,000 a year to making more than \$50,000 makes you twice as likely to be happy, yet the payoff for then surpassing \$90,000 is slight. And while the rich are happier than the poor, the enormous rise in living standards over the past 50 years hasn’t made Americans happier.

In fact, there is also research that shows generosity brings greater happiness than selfish spending of money. I read of a study in the June 2008 Psychology Today magazine that was based on an experiment where people were given money with the simple instruction that they could spend it on themselves or spend it on someone else. Those who spent the money on others were happier despite the initial prediction of participants that they would get the most happiness on spending it on themselves!

I have a great memory of something like this. Some years ago, we were on our annual extended family outing to Caroline Bay in Timaru. We went down via Mayfield so we could go to the amazing “overflow” second-hand shop there. My 9-year-old niece had \$20 to spend at the Bay Carnival, but she saw something at the second-hand shop that she thought Uncle Hamish would love, so she spent all her money on me! What a lovely thing, that has created a very special bond between us ever since!

In the Exodus story of the Golden Calf, God is so angry and frustrated by the negative choice of the Israelites! He uses the ‘wrath’ word! I think this just emphasizes that they were making choices that sapped them of life, happiness, peace, shalom. They were putting their trust in the wrong thing!

There is a very interesting conversation that ensues between God and Moses, where Moses implores God not to abandon his plan of rescue! A plan that began with Abraham. A plan that was headed toward a promised land that symbolised Shalom! God relents and stays with the big peace plan!

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we see a very positive example of how to live in peace, Shalom. It is about filling up with the right things; a joyful, prayerful, positive-thinking, right-acting life that will guard our minds and souls against a restless, conflicted dislocation and instead result in a deep peace, a divine peace, that passes all human understanding!

How do we do that?

1. Make good choices about what we watch and read!
2. Set aside time each day to pray, replacing a worrisome and anxious restlessness that robs us of sleep with a prayerful trust.

Personally, this is so best done first thing in the morning – like listening to the upbeat music that is good for our mental health and the healthy breakfast so good for our physical wellbeing, the quiet drawing aside to communion with God that brings a deep peace, wholeness, rest and quietness to our soul as we begin the gift of each new day!