

Ordinary acts of grace
4 December 2016

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

During our lives, we encounter some people who make such indelible impressions on us that we are never quite the same again. And one person who had a profound impact on my outlook on life was my friend Sam.

Like most of my friends back in the day, Sam was far from conventional. She defiantly refused to fit any moulds that society would have expected her to conform to. And her usually outrageous hair and rebellious dress sense made her stand out in any crowd.

Meeting Sam for the first time could be interesting, as she could give the impression of being terrifyingly staunch. But Sam was selflessly compassionate. And the only times I can recall her being genuinely angry were when matters of social justice were at stake, and when she felt called to speak up for people who could not speak up for themselves.

I really do not remember how Sam defined her spiritual identity, although I do remember visiting her flat and seeing pictures, icons and statuettes of the Blessed Virgin Mary in prominent places. Back then, we did not really concern ourselves with labels. It was our spiritual and ethical principles, and how well we followed them, that mattered.

Although I would strongly suspect that she would not have been overly keen on the label 'Christian', because she would have struggled to identify with people who called themselves Christians,

but used their faith as a platform from which to condemn people who were different from them.

Sam's occupation as listed on the electoral roll was saint, but I do not think that she was trying to be disrespectful. Instead, I believe it was an expression of her inner desire to make the world a better place. And while some could probably find grounds on which to try judge her, Sam probably came closer to my understanding of saintliness than anybody else I have ever known.

Sam had many talents. She was a poet, a musician and a film maker, but it was for her voluntary work with the more vulnerable and dispossessed members of society that I held her in the highest esteem.

Organisations like the City Mission do wonderful work with the homeless and the marginalised, but Sam took her ministry to places they could never reach. And she reached out to some of society's most rejected and despised people. Such as street prostitutes, intravenous drug users, and people with AIDS.

One night, Sam asked me if I would like to join her on her rounds through some of the murkier enclaves around Cuba Street. I was not overly keen on this mission, but I could not think of a reasonable excuse to avoid it.

We walked through dark streets and alleyways and met various people that I must confess I would have preferred to have avoided. Because it was hardly a good look to be seen speaking with prostitutes in shop doorways in the middle of the night. But they all

knew Sam, who understand their fears and insecurities, and they were comfortable with her.

A transgender sex worker, who was probably the oldest person we met that night, told Sam she was an angel. And an angel she might well have been, but Sam, a young woman with so much to give, died tragically at the age of 31.

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation, when we look forward to remembering the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, much like Lent is a time of preparation for his death, and resurrection at Easter.

A traditional theme for the Second Sunday of Advent is peace. And when we listened to our Older Testament lesson from Isaiah this morning, we heard how the wolf would lay down with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf with the lion, and the cow would eat with the bear.¹ Which was all very peaceful and harmonious sounding. But when we came to our gospel reading, St John the Baptist took centre stage. And he threw everything into chaos.

If we were to judge John on our first impressions of him, peace would not be the first word that came to mind. He was a wild prophet, who dressed in clothing made from camel's hair, lived on locusts and wild honey, and had some very choice words for the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two of the leading Jewish religious, political, and social movements of the day, and their members enjoyed considerable privilege and prestige. And John's

call to them to repent was a call for them to them to stop perpetrating the systemic injustice they heaped on the rest of society. In other words, to stop using their positions of power to exploit others. No wonder he called them a “brood of vipers”, a term Jesus would later use.

But despite his fiery appearance, John actually preached a message of peace. He challenged the violence of the power structures that were oppressing his people, just as Jesus would later do, so we shouldn't really be surprised that they were both arrested and killed.

I was trying to think of someone who reminded me St John the Baptist, and the best person I could think of was Sam, whom I spoke of earlier. Like John, she appeared outrageous in the eyes of polite society. Like John, she really cared about those whom were being hurt by injustice. And like John, she was not afraid to speak out against those who were responsible.

In an article last year, the Rev Dr Eric D. Barreto, an Associate Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary and an ordained Baptist minister, wrote how we need a new St John the Baptist, “...who will speak prophetically and clearly in the wilderness.... warn us that judgment is at hand, that God will no longer tolerate the quotidian violence we deem normal... [and] who will name the sins that pervade our relationships and our communities, the injustices that structure a broken world. But... who will point us to the path God has set before us.”³

And a new St John the Baptist "... might call us to the radical idea that seemingly ordinary lives can be imbued with the extraordinary spirit of God to transform the world."⁴

Citing the Gospel According to St Luke's version of today's gospel reading, which has some added details about sharing with those in need and behaving ethically,⁵ Barreto says John called on the people to perform what he calls, "ordinary acts of grace".⁶ And he called on us to do likewise.

After John's ministry had ended, Jesus took centre stage. And he gave us two simple commandments: to love God, and to love others.

In the Older Testament, these two commandments are in completely separate books of the Law. It took Jesus to bring them together. And I would argue that these two are so powerfully linked that it is by showing our love for others that we show our love for God.

My definition of Christian ministry is revealing the Christ in word and action.

But for people to see the Christ in us, we must see Christ in them. And when we perform ordinary acts of grace, such as giving food to the hungry, refreshing the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting prisoners, we do it for him.⁷

And I believe it is our calling to work towards the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace.

So as we continue our journey of Advent, I pray that we do our part to transform the world through ordinary acts of grace.

Just like Sam did.

Darryl Ward

4 December 2016

<http://theword.tk>

¹ Isaiah 11:6-7

² Matthew 23:33

³ <https://sojo.net/articles/these-days-we-need-john-baptist>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Luke 3:10-14

⁶ <https://sojo.net/articles/these-days-we-need-john-baptist>

⁷ Matthew 25:34-40