**Jerome’s Visit**

Thursday afternoon I heard a knock on the downstairs door. When I opened the door I saw a man in his thirties; while he was clean he had the look of the homeless about him. He had long hair and a very long, untrimmed beard. As the homeless often do he wore many layers and he was carrying a sizable duffle bag on his back. He had a broad, friendly smile and his speech was heavily accented (European for sure, Greek I think).

He opened with, “Sorry to take you from your work but I was wondering if you have a Greek dictionary. I was thinking about the sermon on the plain in Luke’s gospel and a small Greek word ‘apos’ which he put in front of the word ‘lend’. You see, I don’t think we should be translating the word as ‘lend’ but rather ‘give’.” In a calm, measured voice he continued. “You see, it occurs to me that Christ would not tell us not to lend something in anticipation of getting it back. By definition all things we lend we intend to get back. I think Jesus was saying don’t give someone something and expect it back but give freely. You see, if I’m right we are using the wrong word.”

I was well and truly intrigued by this man. I have spent most of the past five days in a very quiet, very empty church so the knock on the door was unexpected. Secondly, we don’t get a lot of obviously “homeless” people in Port Perry. And, having lived most of my life in Toronto, my experience of those who live on the streets is that they generally keep to themselves, say very little and have an edge of fear about them, a wariness bred from hard experience. In addition to all of this, I wasn’t hearing the delusional ramblings of an unstable man (which frequently get fixated on religious matters). His observations were correct!

I asked him his name and he said “Jerome, what is yours?” I told him I was Philip. I also told him that I am most definitely not a linguist. I said that I did not have a Greek dictionary and then joked that, “The the little Greek I learned I forgot as fast as I could.” He said, “Sorry again to take you from what you were doing, but perhaps we could continue to talk.”Jerome was very engaging with an inviting smile and I found myself saying, “I would like that. I am finishing my lunch a little bit of work on the computer but if you’ll come back in half an hour we can talk some more.”

Half an hour later I looked and he was not outside, five minutes after that he was. He did not knock the second time, he just arrived and sat on his duffle bag and waited. I met him at the door with my coat on and we walked toward Queen Street. I said to this intriguing man, “So Jerome, where do you come from?” and he smiled, and with neither malice nor offence in his voice he said, “Ahhh, you mean ‘Who am I and what am I doing here?’” He said, “I wander. I started today in Uxbridge. I sleep outside and I wander from small town to small town. I have been doing this for three years.” So, he was a “street person”. He just seemed so effortlessly approachable I asked him quite directly, “Why? Why do you sleep outside, why do you wander?” and said “It keeps me unshackled. I am free” As he and I already had an easier banter established between us I said “My friend it is the shackles of relationship that set us free. Alone is not a state of freedom, loneliness is the worst sort of prison” I wasn’t preaching or correcting just chatting and he was aware of this.

I asked, “Do you self-identify as a Christian or do you call yourself a seeker?” He said I consider myself a ‘Jesus proverbialist’. Jesus was wise and spoke in proverbs and I try to live my life according to his proverbs.”

 As we walked along I was aware that this entire interaction was...odd. I wanted to hold my own in conversation with this fellow, which even in the moment seemed ridiculous. This pleasant, homeless man was so beguiling that I didn’t want to let him down conversationally. We played a sort of give and take word game as we ambled along.

Given all of the Corona virus protocols in place the only restaurant open for a coffee was Hanks. I popped in and got us both a coffee. Even this exchange was pleasant. “Can I get you a coffee Jerome, I’m having one?” This got me a smile and a gentle nod. “How do you take it my friend?” “I take it Philip as you take yours.” What a cool answer, eh? I’m gonna use that one day.

With coffees in hand we wandered down to the benches in front of the docks at the foot of Queen. As we sat down he went back to his opening thoughts on Jesus’ dictate against lending when we expect a return. “You know Philip, the same heart cannot be forgiving and lending. It is not possible and I believe Jesus was telling us this. You see to forgive someone is a one way communication. To forgive is to set someone free. It is a giving act, in doing this we say ‘I give you forgiveness, I want nothing from you, you are free.’, whereas anyone who loans a thing, by definition, wants that thing back. Otherwise they would be giving the thing, not loaning it. The same heart that says “I forgive, I give freely” cannot also say “I give but I want something back.” His point was simple yet profound.

 I was gobsmacked by what I still perceived to be the incongruity of this homeless man being so thoughtfully, intelligently correct in his theology. I’m pretty sure my sadly ingrained biases were showing. If they were Jerome had the grace not to let on. As this seeker was passionately interested in the prefix to a verb in one specific sentence I wanted to warn him about attaching too much to words. I said, “While I respect the consistency of your thought I am afraid you are especially attached to the words of scripture as opposed to the Word of God.” With this I shared my belief that the words of the texts of the bible convey truth but not necessarily accuracy. He heard me patiently and said he would think about the points I made but I could see that on this he and I would not agree.

We talked easily and comfortably for about half an hour. Eventually I stood up and tossed by empty coffee cup into a nearby garbage container and said, “Well Jerome I suppose I should be getting back to work.” And he looked me directly in the eye and said, “But Philip you have been working this whole time. This kindness you have shown me is this not your work?” I smiled and said something light and self-deprecating. I honestly don’t recall what I said but it was the first time I was uncomfortable, as if I had said something stupid. But again Jerome never even hinted at a reason for me to feel anything negative.

Several hours later Ruthanne and I were talking. Our priest likes to keep her finger on the pulse of the parish even as she is self-isolating at home and makes daily inquiry into who I communicated with and how they are doing. When I told her about this visit by Jerome she smiled and said, “I love visits like that. One of the great things about this job is that from time to time you get an interaction like that!” Then Ruthanne said something powerful; she said “You had a visit from Jesus this afternoon”

After I left Jerome I went back to the church and got lost in emails and phone calls and I had not properly processed the whole exchange. Now I realized that I was being blessed for the second time in Ruthanne’s wisdom. All I was reporting to Ruthanne was that I was feeling blessed and uplifted by this odd exchange. Once she said, “You were visited by Jesus” the whole meeting with Jerome fell into a new light. Just as an aside I was struck, not for the first time that we have a wise priest. I wonder how long after ordination this wisdom kicks in; when I find out I’ll let you know.

Let me share some of thoughts that occurred to me in this new light. First I was given a fresh reminder that very often God blesses us and we don’t realize it ourselves. We are social creatures and it’s good that we have someone with whom to talk and share. Very often it takes someone else to point out how God has acted in our life.

The second thought I had was that I had been enthralled by the trees but had lost sight of the forest. What I mean is this; I noticed that my visitor looked like (what I imagine) Jesus did, he sounded like him, he was in his young thirties and referred to himself not as homeless but as a wanderer. Jerome had been wandering for three years, he knew the scripture and he had an inviting nature. He spoke clearly but softly and looked at me when he listened to me. But it was none of this that led Ruthanne to tell me that I had been visited by Jesus. I have little doubt that she shared my intrigue at the details of this traveller but what I believe she was reminding me was simply that we see and hear Christ in the people we meet. In this life all of our glimpses of Jesus will come in the real people we meet. Frequently Christ appears to us in strangers or in the people we least expect. What we need are the enlightened eyes of faith to see Jesus in the people we meet, and hear him in their words.

Sure, if I was casting someone to play Jesus I would have casted Jerome but that is just happenstance. Jesus was at that same time appearing somewhere to someone as a child and elsewhere in the voice of an elderly woman. Anyone, anywhere. This isn’t fanciful imaginings it is exactly how God works.

You see what I did not tell you in my story, but what Ruthanne knew, was that I was having a long, difficult week. Details aside I was just having one of those weeks. Jesus saw that I was struggling and he came to visit me. I will long remember Jerome not so much for who he was but because I am convinced that through him Jesus came to me in my time of need.

I recently saw a sign that said something like, “When you have a lot of food, don’t build bigger cupboards build a bigger table.” Scripture tells us that as we are blessed so we are to bless others. There are two responses to receiving gifts from God; the first give thanks to God and second, we are to find a way to bless someone else. This is how I want to conclude this reflection.

I hope in reading this story about my visit from Jerome you can hear my gratitude to God. God is good. I love God because God loves me! At the end of a uniquely hard week Jesus came to see me and I have thanked him for popping in with the love reminder. I also want you to feel invited to be Jesus to each other. Call one another, as it seems best visit one another greet people while you’re walking the dog, say hello to the people that populate your day. As Christians we are all called to be Christ- like but don’t take on anything unnatural or artificial in the effort. Be yourself, God made you who and what you are and he wants you to be the unique and wonderful person you are in your world. God does not require that we have any special abilities only that we present as willing. A simple prayer might be; “Dear God let me be your hands, your feet, your ears, your voice or your smile for someone today”.

I’ll finish with this exciting truth; I believe that each of you already has been Jesus to someone. Keep it up! I thank God. I thank God for each of you and I thank you.