

Year B

2 Corinthians 5:6-17

Eminence, a novel by Australian author Morris West, tells the story of Luca Rossini, a Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church. Luca came to serve in the Vatican, after having lived in the shadow of a terrible experience he suffered as a young priest in Argentina. It was the 1970's, a time when the military junta that ruled Argentina, acted with terrible brutality. Luca was brutalised in front of the villagers. Lucky to escape with his life he was spirited out of Argentina. Yet

the scars across his back are an outward symbol of the scars he bears within. By the time we find him in West's novel Luca is 50 years old, a confidant of a rigidly conservative Pope. In one scene the Pope reflects that he, the Pope, will have much to answer for when he comes to judgement before God. Luca responds, "We pray every day that our trespasses will be forgiven, Holiness. We have to believe that our end will be a homecoming, not a session with torturers!"

"Do you really believe that, Luca?" asks the Pope.

“If I did not, Holiness,” replies Luca, “I think I could not endure the chaos of this bloody world or the presence of whatever monster called it into being.”¹

The subject of the final judgement appeared very suddenly in the middle of Paul’s discussion of the implication of new life in Christ. It’s appearance is unexpected and I would suggest that we do not easily accept it. Judgement and the basis of judgement does not sit easily with us and that is especially the case when Paul declared that the judgement would be on the basis of what we

¹ West, Morris 1998 *Eminence* Harper Collins pp106-107

have done, whether good or bad. For centuries some Protestants have been consoling themselves with the knowledge that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and therefore judgement is on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience and not on our faltering and error-strewn efforts. The Roman Catholic tradition would adopt a somewhat different position expressed through the Pope's comments in my opening illustration. We all hope for Luca's view and I think with reference to the text from 2 Corinthians

today we have good hope to expect the mercy and leniency of God.

Parker Palmer in his book, *The Active Life*, described going on an outward bound course. He wrote;

“I took the course in my early forties, and in the middle of that course I was asked to confront the thing I had fears about since I had first heard about Outward Bound: a gossamer strand was hooked to a harness around my body, I was back up to the top of a 110-foot cliff, and I was told to lean out over God's own emptiness and walk down

the face of that cliff to the ground eleven stories below.

"I remember the cliff all too well," Palmer says. "It started with a five-foot drop to a small ledge, then a ten-foot drop to another ledge, then a third and final drop all the way down. I tried to negotiate the first drop; but my feet instantly went out from under me, and I fell heavily to the first ledge. 'I don't think you quite have it yet,' the instructor observed astutely. 'You are leaning too close to the rock face. You need to lean much farther back so your feet will grip the wall.' That advice went against my every instinct,"

Palmer continued. "Surely one should hug the wall, not lean out over the voice! But on the second drop I tried to lean back; better, but not far enough, and I hit the second ledge with a thud not unlike the first. 'You still don't have it,' said the ever-observant instructor. 'Try again.'

"Since my next try would be the last one, her counsel was not especially comforting. But try I did, and much to my amazement I found myself moving slowly down the rock wall. Step-by-step," Palmer said, "I made my way with growing confidence until, about halfway down, I suddenly realized that I was

heading toward a very large hole in the rock, and--not knowing anything better to do--I froze. The instructor waited a small eternity for me to thaw out, and when she realized that I was showing no signs of life she yelled up, 'Is anything wrong, Parker?' as if she needed to ask. To this day, I do not know the source of my childlike voice that came up from within me, but my response is a matter of public record. I said, 'I don't want to talk about it.'"

Palmer continues, "The instructor yelled back, 'Then I think it's time you learned the Outward Bound Motto.' Wonderful, I

thought. I am about to die, and she is feeding me a pithy saying. But then she speaks words I have never forgotten, words so true that they empowered me to negotiate the test of that cliff without incident: 'If you can't get out of it, get into it.' Bone deep," Palmer says, "I knew that there was no way out of this situation except to go deeper into it, and with that knowledge my feet began to move."²

Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth century mystic, rightly pointed out that spirituality has much more to do with subtraction than

² Palmer, Parker 1999 *The Active Life* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass pp32-33

it does with addition. Most spirituality in the West has largely become a matter of addition. This can focus on learning more spiritual ideas, earning merit badges from God, trying to attain enlightenment, and the will power of heroic moral behaviour. Yet the counter-intuitive nature of Jesus life shows it is not at all about getting, attaining, achieving, performing, or succeeding, all of which tend to pander to the ego. Jesus' spirituality was much more about letting go of what we do not need anyway. It is Jesus' love that holds all things together and not an accumulation of good works. It is Jesus' death to self

throughout his life and ultimately expressed in his self-giving on the cross that enables true, genuine life to be lived, and that life can only find fulfilment in new creation. This new creation does not amount to a scrubbing out of all that has gone before but to a re-creation; a making new of all that has happened in the past that it would be presented perfect. It's that vision that the apostle Paul reaches out to us with, as he urges us to lift our heads that we do not settle for a human point of view any longer, but see a God-inspired vision of all things.