



Recently I went home

Recently I went home - to Gympie, the Queensland country town where I was born and reared but which I left 47 years ago. I went home to help bury a personal and family friend whom I have known all my life. She was a wife, mother, secretary and confidant, a beautiful, practical woman with a quiet, mischievous smile and natural easy compassion. Tragically she spent the last five years in the “fog” of dementia. For the last three years she has been in a nursing home and every afternoon her husband had visited her, taken her for a walk, fed her, held her hand and talked for an hour or so with little response.

At the funeral I was struck by a few things. One was the saying from Paul, “death where is your sting?” Death had lost much of its sting here because the people involved had died so often to self through many years that the final death was part of the journey. Death’s major sting is for us more selfish and self-centred people.

I also thought of Oscar Wilde’s definition of a cynic - the one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Wilde was reminding us that true value resides in things that are not marketable; that are earned not bought. The really valuable things in life are love, self-sacrifice, loyalty and faithfulness.

We live in a world where change is now systemic. Everything is changing, even the framework within which change occurs. It is difficult for many to cope, especially when the social institutions that used to provide stability like marriage or a job for life, or even the sense of belonging to a place, have been eroded. Many of us no longer feel we have control over our lives. Great forces surround us: technological change, global warming and global financial crises. Even nation-states feel less powerful in an international market where their future is determined by markets and companies half way across the world.

The funeral was an important moment for me to appreciate once again the value of love, loyalty and faithfulness and also the importance of belonging somewhere.

I left Gympie in 1963 and as a missionary have travelled the world. Missionaries are unusual people. We have multiple homes and many loyalties and to a certain extent we belong everywhere and yet nowhere totally. Yet whenever I return to Gympie I know the difference. It was strange to look down from the altar at the congregation. One third of them have known me since I was a boy, two thirds must have been wondering who the strange priest was?

Confidence is a scarce commodity in times of change but that day I learnt how important it is to know the value, not the price of things and the importance of belonging.

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