

Jesus, Mindfulness and the Cookie...

16/7/17

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

I was recently invited to attend a spiritual retreat at Schoenstatt in Constantia facilitated by the Revd Michael Bester and directed by the Revd Erica Murray. The retreat was held under the auspices of an Anglican Religious Community known as the Community of the Resurrection, which is to be found in Mirfield, UK. The idea was for me to spend time in prayer considering applying to be a Companion of the Community. Part of the retreat included practicing the discipline of Greater Silence. This meant we were called to keep quiet during the programme and meals. Erica joined us for most of our meals and proceeded to read to us during our meals.

The book she chose was of great interest to me. It was an unusual choice. After listening to some of the true short stories that were read, I begged her to lend me the book for the evening so that I could read it for myself in the privacy of my small room. Erica replied, "You should be spending time with God, Father, not reading..." To which I replied, "This book brings me closer to God..." Erica smiled... and passed me the book.

The book, entitled "At Home in the World" is written by Thich Nhat Hanh. It is a collection of autobiographical stories from the life of Zen master and peace activist. They range from tales of his childhood and the traditions of rural Vietnam, to his years as a teenage novice, young teacher and writer in war-torn Vietnam. Later on in the book we see him travelling widely to teach mindfulness, founding practice centres around the globe and influencing world leaders.

Once I started listening to and reading his life stories, I was mesmerised by the idea of mindfulness. While it seems to be on many people's lips at the moment, it took a Vietnamese Buddhist Monk for me to take notice of the term and idea. I started to research the idea of mindfulness, as I wondered what impact it would have upon me as a Christian and as a Priest.

Listen for a moment to the idea of mindfulness and how it can be related to the person of Jesus, as well as how it can assist us in our journey of life.

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we are doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what is going on around us.

Mindfulness has many synonyms. You could call it awareness, attention, focus, presence or vigilance. The opposite could be said to be mindlessness, distractedness, inattention and lack of engagement.

When you are exhibiting mindfulness, you are fully engaged in whatever is going on around you. Another way of explaining this is to be “fully in the moment...” This is not an easy discipline to achieve considering all of the distractions in our lives.

Mindfulness is a very simple form of meditation that was little known in the West until recently. A typical meditation consists of focussing your full attention on your breath as it flows in and out of your body. Focusing on each breath in this way allows you to observe your thoughts as they arise in your mind and, little by little, to let go of struggling with them. You come to the profound understanding that thoughts and feelings are transient. They come and go, and ultimately, you have the choice about whether to act on them or not.

Specialists in the field have suggested that mindfulness has the potential to be a transformative social phenomenon:

- a) Anyone can do it!
- b) It becomes a way of living.
- c) It is evidence based. Science proves the benefits.
- d) It sparks innovation.

As I spent time reflecting on the idea of mindfulness, I asked myself the question as to how Jesus may have practised mindfulness in His lifetime and ministry. We know that Jesus was a high EQ person who put people and their feelings first. This is what made Him so special in all of His interactions and engagements with different people from various walks of life. I began to reflect

on some of the stories in the New Testament and Gospels that reflect His skill of practicing mindfulness... and here are a few:

- 1) Do you remember when Jesus spent time praying on the Mount of Olives on the night before His crucifixion? (Luke 22:39) Here Jesus must have felt the pressure and anxiety of the events that were to come, yet He had the skill and wisdom to remove Himself from the chaos, even for a short while, in order to practice being mindful and spend time in prayer. His actions, during a time of intense stress, reflect being fully engaged in the events of the day, yet fully in control of His anxiety and stress. This is practicing mindfulness.
- 2) Do you remember when during the arrest of Jesus, one of His followers struck off the ear of one of the High Priests? (Luke 22:49) Jesus remained calm and in control of Himself during a very tense moment that could easily have defaulted to extreme violence and death. Yet, by practicing the art of mindfulness, Jesus calmed the situation down and proceeded to heal the ear of the High Priest. This is practicing mindfulness.
- 3) Today we read one of the famous parables from the Gospel. (Matt 13) Through the art of practicing mindfulness, Jesus had the blessed skill of taking complicated philosophical ideas and presenting them in a form of metaphor to His followers, who were not always educated and literate. By doing this, Jesus ensured that His followers remained engaged and present during his ministry. This is practicing mindfulness.

There are many examples of in the Gospels and New Testament reflecting how Jesus practiced the art of mindfulness. As a leader He knew that in order to fully actualise His ministry, Jesus had to remain centred and engaged with Himself, before He could be a leader and prophet. By doing this, in other words, practicing the art of mindfulness, Jesus was able to remain connected with His Father through the Holy Spirit. This ultimately meant that Jesus was able to grow as a person and a leader in the faith.

As Christians we are called to do the same.

Just as Thich Nhat Hanh realised from an early age that if he was to be a successful Buddhist monk, he needed to master the skill of mindfulness, so we too are called to be fully engaged and present in the moment.

This implies that we as Christians need to be fully present during our times of worship and prayer so that we can be open to the Holy Spirit.

By doing this, we are then able to fully appreciate the power of Jesus in our lives and all that He promises us. It is so easy for us to be distracted every waking moment of the day, that we eventually become disengaged in everything that we do, including how we spend time with Jesus and one another in the church.

There has never been a more important time in the world for us as Christians to remain fully engaged in Jesus, one another and the world around us. We are called to be with Jesus, fully, and if it means that by practicing the art of mindfulness in order to better achieve this, then let us learn how to do this as quickly as possible... it is ultimately in our best interest.

I would like to close off this morning by reading a short story from Hanh's book:

"Eating My Cookie

When I was four years old, my mother used to bring me a cookie every time she returned from the market. I would go to the front yard and take my time eating it, sometimes taking half an hour or forty-five minutes to eat one cookie. I would take a small bite and look up at the sky. Then I would touch the dog with my feet and take another small bite. I just enjoyed being there, with the sky, the earth, the bamboo thickets, the cat, the dog, the flowers. I was able to spend so much time eating my cookie because I did not have much to worry about. I was not thinking about the future. I was not regretting the past. I was dwelling entirely in the present moment, with my cookie, the dog, the bamboo thickets, the cat and everything.

It is possible to eat our meals as slowly and joyfully as I ate the cookie of my childhood. Maybe you have the impression that you have lost the cookie of your childhood, but I am sure it is still there, somewhere in your heart. Everything is still there, and if you really want it, you can find it. Eating mindfully is a most important practice of meditation. We can eat in a way that we can bring back to life the cookie of our childhood. The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it."

Are you ready to read up on the art of being mindful so that you can ultimately grow closer to Jesus?

May God bless you in the week ahead as you continue to explore the journey of life with Jesus through the art of mindfulness.

Amen.