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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Gandhi at 150: led by the kindly light of truth

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Mohandas Gandhi had both a remarkable impact and a continuing legacy not only for the people of India but the world. Gandhi galvanized the Indian nationalist movement through the force of his life and practical non-violent resistance to British rule. His legacy was not only in the political realm but also as a writer with over 100 volumes of collected writings and an influence that touched one of Australia's great writers Patrick White.

In July 2017 my wife and I were in London briefly and had occasion to visit Parliament Square. And the statue that captured our attention was none other than that of Mahatma Gandhi. (There is a similar one in the national capital of Australia, Canberra¹). The London statue of Gandhi had been unveiled in March 2015 to mark the 100th anniversary of Gandhi's return to India to start the struggle for independence from British rule. The unveiling had been conducted in the presence of Gandhi's grandson and some other notables including the then Prime Minister David Cameron. At the time Cameron described Gandhi as 'one of the most towering figures' in political history. He said 'By putting Gandhi in this famous square we are giving him an eternal home in our country. This statue celebrates the incredibly special friendship between the world's oldest democracy and its largest, as well as the universal power of Gandhi's message'. That's all undoubtedly true though 100 years ago I doubt that the then British Government could have imagined the impact of Gandhi on the Indian nationalist movement of the day.

The recent film, *The Viceroy's House* makes it clear that Gandhi cut a lone figure in his protest at the time against partition in that tumultuous and brutal period.

Gandhi did indeed galvanize a nation. He became the focus and the glue for an emergent sense of nationhood. He achieved this through a creative and powerful synthesis of national identity. The twin elements of unity in India in Gandhi's day were first the British Raj (a somewhat artificial overlay of political authority), and a cultural religious caste system. Gandhi, through his time in South Africa and his experience as an outcast and exile came to see that both these elements of national unity were indeed dangerous and prevented the full flowering of a people's hopes and aspirations. His life and work was dedicated to finding a deeper unity; a stronger and more lasting social glue that would bind the people of Indian. That it seems to me was part of his great mission. Moreover it was to be undertaken in a decidedly non-violent manner that resonated with Gandhi's deepest convictions regarding the spiritual calling of humankind and the quest for truthful living.

¹ The Monument was unveiled in 2002. The inscription reads: Apostle of non-violence (Ahimsa) and truth (Satyagrah) October 2, 1869 – 30 January 1948. 'Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon the earth' – Albert Einstein.

In J T F Jordan's carefully researched book *Gandhi's Religion*, the author offers a beautiful homely image of Gandhi's capacity to harness and focus Indian sense of oneness.² Jordan likened Gandhi's synthesis to a 'large, bulky homespun woollen shawl'. Jordan remarked that 'at first it looks very plain to the eye, but we can detect the beauty of the strong patterns and the contrasting shades of folk art. With its knots and unevenness, it feels at first rough to the touch; but soon we can experience how effective it is in warming cold and hungry limbs'.³

Gandhi's unique way of drawing the people of India together provoked a question for me concerning Australia. What holds us together? It's a simple question? More importantly: What are the conditions required for a flourishing human society? These questions underlie so much of contemporary political, cultural and religious life. Various political, social and economic management techniques are applied to create some kind of uniformity of purpose and vision. We appeal to Australian values but then argue about what they might be. Our efforts to generate a cohesive society often have the reverse effect of accentuating divisions. Of course where there are increasing inequalities it will always be an uphill struggle to grow strong cohesive caring communities. In this context truth quite quickly is reduced to matters of self-interest; and religion is always on the brink of being captured by prevailing ideologies of power. The consequence is that neither the cause of truth or religion are furthered but rather undergo distortion.

In contemporary Australia we can observe two parallel developments. First increasing cultural, religious and social diversity. Second a tendency to become preoccupied with one's own particular social, political, cultural or religious group. The disconnections here can be profound. They are exacerbated by those who stand to benefit from promoting narratives of fear and anxiety.

However the deeper truth is that we are connected to one another and the blue planet. Environmental concerns, and recognition that our lives are inextricably woven into the fabric of the planet and indeed the cosmos, have reminded us that we are connected with each other and the earth. People are migrating around the earth and it will only increase. In this process the question of human rights cannot be avoided or ignored. Nor can the truth question be consigned to the interior dispositions of individuals on the assumption that any truth will do and my truth is as good as yours. The deepest and most pressing issues of life raise the question of truth and inevitably provoke controversy. In this respect I am reminded of the Australian Anglican Bishop, Ernest Burgmann's final public words in 1960, broadcast on the ABC: "My conviction is that nothing is worth believing if it is not ready to be subjected to repeated scrutiny. God does not want us to

² JTF Jordan, *Gandhi's Religion*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

³ Jordan, *Gandhi's Religion*, 276.

believe lies. Truth is shy and hard to woo, but she is very lovely and worth a life's devotion."⁴ It was a sentiment that Gandhi embraced in his life and work and it proved extremely costly.

How then shall we craft a future for the common good? What kind of people do we need to become in order to respond to such challenges, pressures and anxieties? Might not the spirit of Gandhi be precisely what is required in our day? Mohandas Gandhi; 'great soul', Indian patriot, holy person, political leader, galvanizer of a nation.

I want to briefly touch on three things that belong to the legacy of Gandhi and continue to challenge our present situation. Three fundamental convictions of Gandhi that informed his life.

First, Gandhi's commitment to truth—Satyagraha—the force of truth; and its organic relation to non-violence. These two are like brother and sister; left and right hand. Gandhi was concerned with the practice of truth, not simply its theory. He desired to live truthfully. I am reminded of that phrase in Psalm 90, 'Lord you desire truth in the inward parts', something inculcated in Gandhi from his early family life especially his mother. And what did living truthfully look like? In the face of inequalities and injustices Gandhi set out on the path of non-violent resistance. The deeper religious foundations for eschewing violence eventually emerged for Gandhi. The Sermon on the Mount was of course a favourite Scripture text for Gandhi and especially Jesus' radical injunction, 'Love your enemies'.

What would non-violent resistance look like in Australia? In the first place it is an attitude of mind, a commitment to shalom. The concept of Shalom in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions involves justice and peace. Responding to injustice and resisting growing inequalities through reasoned and determined engagement in the political and religious domains is fundamental for a western democracy.

Second, power through service. What Gandhi learnt in the home he lived out in the world. In an age of self-interest Gandhi offers a radical self in the service of others for a greater common good. It was driven by compassion for the outsider, the oppressed, and the voiceless.

Third, humility of life. Clearly this is not a recommendation for inaction, subservience and weakness. Gandhi's life was anything but that. His humble resolute determination to walk in the light of truth showed what strength and power there is in true humility of life. Gandhi's humility expressed itself in many ways, not least in a life of prayer, reflection, writing and poetry. 100 volumes of writing isn't a bad record for a political activist. Professor Satendra Nandan, in his Gandhi Oration to mark the International Day of Non-Violence in October 2017 in Canberra,

⁴ Peter Hempenstall, *The Meddlesome Priest: A Life of Ernest Burgmann* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), p. 339.

referred to the comment of the justly famous Australian writer, Patrick White⁵ who said that ‘Gandhi achieved much with that quality of faith; we all in the nuclear age will have to call on our reserves of faith.’ Humility and simplicity’, said White, ‘are imperative for our survival and meaningful relationships’.

So finally, whence comes the inner strength to continue the pursuit of truth and commitment to non-violence? Sustained engagement of the kind Gandhi exemplified requires an inner composure and deep faith. Gandhi gave a clue at the end of his life: ‘in my daily prayers I earnestly pray to God to lead me from untruth to truth. Isn’t the same idea conveyed in “lead kindly light”’? This hymn composed by John Henry Newman at a period of intense personal trauma as he left the Church of England for Rome in the mid Nineteenth century was well known to Gandhi from his years in England. This was the hymn that spoke to Gandhi more than any others that he knew and sang. The hymn contained, Gandhi believed, the ‘quintessence of all philosophy’.⁶ He meditated daily upon it’s words, encouraged his supporters to do the same, broke fasts with it, chastised the press with it, quoted it to the British in difficult conversations, had it translated so it could be sung at daily meetings, and closed many writings and speeches with the distinctive injunction of the hymn ‘one step enough for me’. He considered that the hymn applied to organisations as much as individuals; it was for Gandhi (perhaps not for the nationalist movement as a whole) a fine representation of the spirit of his *satyagraha* campaigns.⁷ The words which captured Gandhi were these:

Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,

Lead Thou me on,

The night is dark and I am far from home,
lead Thou me on;

Keep thou my feet, I do not ask to see

The distant scene, - one step enough for me.

The thought that sufficient light was given to take the next step was crucial to Gandhi. This so infused Gandhi’s soul that eventually it became the song of the ashrams. Hindu, Muslim, and

⁵ Professor Nandan’s address was entitled: ‘The making of the Mahatma: An Australasian perspective on Multiculturalism, Migration, Human Rights and Non-Violence’.

⁶ William Emilsen, ‘Gandhi and “Lead, Kindly Light”’, in *This Immense Panorama. Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe*, (eds) Carole M. Cusack and Peter Oldmeadow, (Sydney Studies in Religion 2), The University of Sydney, School of Studies in Religion, 1999, pp. 227–237. This reference p. 230.

⁷ Emilsen, ‘Gandhi and ‘Lead, Kindly Light’. 231.

Christian supporters of Indian independence sang it every Friday evening, as Gandhi said on ‘the day of Jesus’ crucifixion’.

What holds us together? A common purpose, the common good, a common spirit; a new song. In a fake news and information environment today do we believe in the force of truth? Gandhi offers us a deeper wisdom that has the power to bind, heal and make for the flourishing of a people. His legacy is more important than ever.