



## **Profundus: Seeking God in the dark night of the soul Part 2**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be worthy in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is the second of my Serenata January Night Prayer series entitled "Profundus: Seeking God in the dark night of the soul". Why do I use the word *profundus*? Profundus is the Latin word for deep and, of course, the root word of our English term 'profound'. Something that is profound is not only something deep in meaning but also, implicitly, worthy of being found. It has also led to an understanding that sometimes things worthy of being found may be encountered not only in places of deep thought, but also in places of the dark depths, out of sight of the light. It may be the place, for example, where one feels so deep down in the darkness of spirit that one strains one's eyes even to catch a glimmer of light as a beacon of any hope.

In our language and expressions, we play with this idea of seeking light from the dark, with sayings such as:

- The light at the end of the tunnel
- It's always darkest before the dawn

But these easily said clichés may lead us to glide over their more powerful meanings. It is interesting that for Jews the concept of a day starts with the night and is followed by the light of day; unlike our modern chronological concept of a day which starts in the middle of the night (midnight) and will finish there – light bookended by the dark.

The design of cathedrals seeks to reflect the Jewish concept. The west door is so named for it is where the sun has set; while the high altar at the other end is in the east where the sun rises – so there is dark at the entry which looks forward to the rising light.

It is always darkest before the dawn. Oh, how I have felt that so often this past year. I am not by nature an insomniac, but when I am stressed I particularly dread the hour of 4am. For if I awake at that time, and am going through a period of worry or anxiety, I know that in all probability I will remain awake for the next two hours or more. During this time, my mind will be noisy with

troubled thoughts and mind-conversations as daytime problems assume gigantic nighttime proportions. Increasingly distressed, I will beg God to let me go back to sleep; but, until he does, my stress feeds itself with its own toxin of wakefulness and I keep on my troubled thinking. Inevitably, I eventually fall back into sleep with the solace that often upon waking after such bouts of insomnia, the sleep will have settled my mind and I may awaken with clearer thoughts about how I might tackle the stresses of the day.

During these bouts of insomnia, I try praying amidst the flood of busy thoughts but my prayers seem too easily shouted down so that, in the end, their voice seems little more than groaning.

Some of you may relate to what I am saying either by similar experiences of the dreaded night watch or from parallel events of anxiety and stress getting the better of you. I would like to thank those of who commented on my homily last Sunday for your helpful thoughts.

We can all take heart from the words of the psalmist in our psalm tonight (Psalm 6):

I am worn out from my groaning.  
All night long I flood my bed with weeping  
and drench my couch with tears. (v6)

For thus we know that we are not alone at the very least because others have experienced the same. Last week I mentioned the experience of John Wesley with depression. Tonight, I want to share the experience of Martin Luther. South Australian Luther scholar, Stephen Pietsch has written:

Luther ... is arguably Christianity's most famous depressive. (pxiv)

From our knowledge of his life, it appears Luther suffered depressive episodes throughout his youth and early adulthood, but it would not be until his mid-forties that he would suffer what Pietsch refers to as 'a serious and prolonged depressive breakdown between June 1527 and August 1528' (pxv), quoting Luther himself:

... I have been cast into death and hell, my whole body so bruised that I tremble in all my members. I had almost lost Christ, and was thrown into the billows and buffeted by storms of despair that I was tempted to blaspheme against God.

The trigger for that particular dark night of Luther's soul had been the death, at only eight months of age, of his second child, Elisabeth; for him the grief seemed insurmountable. Though he recovered from this particularly dark profundus – well of despair – he would continue to have depressive moods for the rest of his life.

So, in a clinical sense, Luther was never cured of his depression. But that did not deter him, indeed it galvanized his theological journey. He might have taken heart from the apostle Paul who wrote of his own affliction (never described to us, but clearly deeply burdensome):

I was given a thorn in my flesh ... to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made in weakness'. [2 Cor 12: 7b-9]

Stephen Pietsch writes:

Depressive suffering played a significant role not only in the development of Luther's life and personality, but also in the forging of his theology ... in this way the experience of depression was critical to the growth of Luther's theology as a marker of the depths to which the human soul can sink and yet still not find itself beyond the reach of God's redemptive hand. [pxvi]

This profundus where Luther had often found himself, this dark depth where the light of hope might have seemed so distant and small, was the same place into which the grace of God shone, piercing the darkness with its hope.

Of itself, this was very significant – that Luther would come to an understanding of depression in his life. However, for us the significance became much greater, for Luther did not keep his personal travails with depression to himself. We all know Luther for his famous nailing of the theses to the door of Wurm's cathedral thus becoming a key catalyst in the onset of the Reformation. Less well known, however, is the nailing of his own experience with depression to the public doors of his life.

Not only was he a frequent correspondent about handling depression, he was also recorded as having often talked about it in the famous Table Talks he would do with guests after dinner each night in the 1530s.

As an example of his correspondence, on October 7 1534, Luther wrote to Matthias Weller, counselling him on his experience with depression:

Dear Matthias, do not follow your own thoughts, but listen to what other people say to you. For God has commanded men to comfort their neighbours, and it is his will that the distressed should take such comfort as from God himself. This is why our Lord says through St Paul, 'Comfort the fainthearted' and through Isaiah: 'Comfort, comfort my people. Speak comfortably.' ... our Lord also commanded us not to be worried, but to cast our worries onto him, for he cares about us. [p286]

In his correspondence, Luther could also be whimsical in his pertinent advice, writing to Jerome, brother of Matthias about putting the world's stresses in perspective:

You can't take precautions against birds flying over your head; but you can take precautions against them building nests in your hair. [p281]

In summary, Pietsch describes the power of Luther's correspondence and table talk as being based upon the fact that Luther:

... knew personally and intimately the internal experience of depression and was able to describe it in terms (others) recognized. [pxvii]

May the encounters some of us have had with depression not hold us back in the depths of the profundus but enable us to see the light of God seeking us out.

Let us now go into a period of prayerful reflection accompanied by Coby Mellor playing the organ. As you reflect, you might like to ponder two verses from W B Yeats' poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' in which he pondered the fact that there is always night and day in our lives, the issue is how we see them:

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.