

Finding focus; kia kaha

Jeremiah 29:10 – 14, Matthew 26:34 – 40



If I were to ask you to write something about this picture, what would you write?

A teacher got her pupils to do just this. They all wrote about the dot in the middle. They described it in various ways, some more creatively than others, but every single one wrote about the dot.

Not one student said anything about the rest of the page. Rather people noticing the potential of the space, it was only the dot they noticed.

It seems to me our lives are filled with an increasing number of dots; things that take our time, our energy, our creativity, things that may not actually be a worthwhile focus at all.

Or perhaps our focus is on opportunities for our children or sports or clubs or craft or justice and environmental issues.

All of those are good things huh? But those activities can get out of proportion, like the dot, so that we think they are more important than anything else.

For Christians sometimes our focus is our belief system or our traditions or our programs or our new building. Perhaps we recognise that church stuff has way too big a part in our lives? If we have no friends or activities outside of church our focus is often fixed on the institution rather than on the Lord who doesn't reside in our churches.

The Bible itself can even take away our focus away from the Lord. That's a bit controversial isn't it?

We need a high regard for Scripture. All of Scripture should be read through the lens of Jesus Christ though. Let me explain my thinking. If we see the Bible as a rule-book to impose on others or something that can be literally interpreted in all instances then even the Bible can become a distraction which can lead us to lose touch with the person; the being of God..

Anything, even very good things, can become a distraction.

I invite you to take a moment now and reflect on what the dots or distractions may be in your life right now? You may like to draw more dots or write your distractions on your paper.

I invite you to put aside those pieces of paper or the mental images you have of your distractions just now. We'll return to them a little later.

Distractions are not new. During Jesus' passion, Peter was distracted by his own needs for safety. He totally lost track of the priority of fulfilling God's purposes in his life through following Jesus. He thought he could be there for Jesus but he was wrong because he took his eyes off the Lord.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples got distracted, in fact totally waylaid, by their physical need for sleep. If they had kept their eyes on Jesus they would have known just how important this time of preparation for Jesus' death was for him. They too took their eyes off him. To use another metaphor they dropped the ball.

Let's take a look at the Jeremiah reading:

So the Jewish people were in exile and they were desperately trying to figure out what God was doing in their midst. More than anything they wanted out of the circumstances in which they found themselves. Where was God? What should they be doing?

The prophet Jeremiah was God's mouthpiece; a prophet to whom they didn't really want to listen.

During this time there were other prophets around. Guys like Hananiah had their own message. (See Jeremiah 28:1 – 3)

Jeremiah always called the people back to God. His plea was for them to stay focused on him; to worship him only, to trust him for their safety and to care for the vulnerable. The other prophets urged the Jews to revolt against the Babylonians hoping this would cause God to bring freedom to them sooner rather than later. They were distracted by ideas of their own nation-hood.

But Jeremiah stayed focused on God and what he was really doing. He knew that God's purposes took time. So he wrote to the exiles:

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Jeremiah 29:5 – 7

Because Jeremiah was focused on the Lord, he knew that while the exiles needed to hang on to the hope of restoration, they needed to live in the NOW with the Lord.

The people needed to “face creatively and positively the present and the future.”¹ They couldn’t do that if they were distracted by false prophets and false hopes. They needed to be able to see God in the present. Only then would the Lord’s purposes be fulfilled in and through them.

When 70 years², or some considerable time, had passed the Lord would rescue them. For now, they were to flourish where they had been placed and they were to trust the Lord.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Wow! What a powerful message! Blessings for the future can only come about if we focus on what God is doing NOW.

It’s quite hard to live in the present. Does anyone else find that?

In his sermon that we are basing this series on Bishop said that one major distraction in the Christian walk is our ideology. By that I think he was meaning that we can hold on, and be distracted by the things we believe. In the Jewish exiles case, they believed, or at least hoped like crazy, that they would be rescued soon.

Does that sound anything like those who focus on the Last Days?

If we focus on our ideology; on being right about what we believe, in proving our perspective, then we become narrow-minded and limit the power of God in our lives and in the lives of others. When this happens we fail to see the generosity and graciousness of God at work in our world in the here and now. On the other hand if we wrestle with God and focus on him – then the things we believe fall into their rightful place.

Can I give you a simple example?

Many of you know that Lord willing, I plan to walk the Camino Santiago as part of my Sabbatical next year. So I’m training for that.

As I do so, I find myself enjoying the Lord more.

What’s momentous about that? Nothing really except that as I walk the next sermon, or past conflicts or future events, worries and even hopes, the dots in my life, seem to fade a bit. Walking is helping me be fully present with the Lord; in the moment with him.

The dots don’t go away. I still need to deal with them but as I focus on God, the dots assume their rightful priority – they are very small and the rest of the page is very big.

¹ Jeremiah; The People’s Bible Commentary, Rex Mason, 141

² By the way, 70 years is most likely, a rounded figure that means in generations to come.

I am sure I will be distracted again; short attention span, many considerations and responsibilities etc. But I'm praying that those moments where the Lord is my complete focus, will become more common.

I invite you to take up your piece of paper or to recall the distractions you pictured earlier and to bring them before God right now.

We can be so distracted; focusing on dots that we forget how to simply be with the One who loves us more than anyone else ever has or ever will. We forget there is so much room to move in the Lord; so much of the page yet to explore.

Take a moment to ask the Lord what he would like you to do with those things. What place should they occupy? What might he like to remove? How might he like to refocus you?

If this all feels daunting and you need help, I know I do, then ask him where or to whom you can go to get help.

Let's pray:

Loving God, gather up our dots. Place them where you want them. Enable us to see you in the whole page. Enable us to follow your plans and purposes. Enable us to walk in the Spirit's power. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Reflection questions:

1. What things make you feel distracted and/or torn in different directions?
2. What has been your experience of seeking and finding God in those things?
3. In what areas would you like the Lord to reintegrate and refocus you?
4. What steps will you take to get the help and support you need with that?