

“They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

Oh those 3am internal conversations! Those nights when your body refuses to sink into sleep's sweet embrace or when your mind drags you out of the deepest dreams with a jolt of worry and dismay. That darkest part of the night, literally as well as metaphorically, when you watch the endless replay of all the mistakes of the day, or the week, or – when things get really fun - your entire life up to this point. When you remember every stupid thing you ever said or did and blush again in the darkness. When you look at the entirety of your life and it suddenly seems a joke without a punchline, a goblin stomping with heavy boots across the universe crying 'panic and emptiness', a cracked cistern, barren and dry.

Usually, thank the good God, we find sleep and wake in the morning with our nighttime distress a fading memory - the cistern patched and the goblin hushed. And we get on with life as it was before. But sometimes, like the prophet Jeremiah, we hear a truth in those night hours that refuses to lie down when we get up. Sometimes we awake knowing that our life has truly exchanged a fountain of living water for the stale remains in a cracked water bottle.

There was an article in the Guardian newspaper a couple of years ago, written by a hospice nurse, on the five things people regretted most at the end of their lives. The first was: “I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.” People saw and deeply mourned that they had not lived true to their own insights, true to their own dreams. The second: “I wish I hadn't worked so hard.” People, especially older men, regretted spending so much of their lives on job success and economic achievement. The third “I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.” Many felt they had buttoned down their true emotions to fit in with others and so had never experienced life in an open heart-strong way. The fourth and fifth seem the simplest and saddest of all “I wish that I had stayed in touch with my friends” and “I wish that I had let myself be happier.”

“They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” I hear this lament echoing through those regrets. An awareness that life could have been much more than they let it be. That they had let true joy and fulfilment slip away and had instead settled for someone else’s definition of what makes life worth the living. A realization of having lost the truth of who they were and the truth of what life is really for.

And I’m going to pause for a moment. Take a breath. Listen, for a moment, to the voice of your own heart, your own truth. Listen to the breath that fills this sacred space. What do you hear of meaning? What do you hear of life? What do you hear of your own deep purpose?

silence

The Church used to be so obsessed with heaven and hell and the afterlife that all we cared about in this life was escaping eternal damnation and wining that eternal reward. So this life was weighted down with rules to make sure it didn’t get too unruly and fun and distracting – faith was all about the everlasting destination and nothing about the joy of the journey. And now, when we have learnt to value this precious God-given life, it can sometimes feel as if it’s still all about guilt – you’re not doing enough to solve poverty, help your neighbour, end homelessness, save the planet. All deeply, deeply true – but not the whole truth, any more than our 3am worries are the whole truth of our lives.

For the whole truth has to take account of the God who is a fountain of living water, pouring herself out for us to drink freely and delightedly of her divinity and love. The whole truth has to take account of Jesus’ promise that he came to bring life and bring it abundantly. We are not a people or a faith who are to be fed by stale water from broken cisterns but by living water freely flowing, enough to satisfy our deepest, deepest thirst and truest longing.

You know how Jesus is talking all the time about the kingdom of God? And how that word 'kingdom' doesn't sit too well in our 21st century ears – especially in a republic? Well one suggestion for its replacement is 'party'ⁱ – the party of God. That Jesus is inviting us into the greatest God-blessed party of all time, and asking us to go and share the invites with everyone we meet. It's a party where we don't worry about taking the places of honour because there is room enough for all. A party where we don't need to restrict the guest list because there is a welcome for all – and, who knows, we may find ourselves sitting next to an angel unawares. A party which pays no heed to our political divisions or any petty distinction of age or gender identity or race or sexuality – a party where we can let our hair down, dance like nobody's watching and be our truest, silliest, happiest self!

There may be some 3am part of yourself that is whispering in your inner ear 'I don't deserve a party'. Well, you're invited anyway. The invitation doesn't depend on the worth of the guest but the boundless love of the host. Or there may be some self-righteous imp prompting you to think 'well they don't deserve a party' – whoever they may be – addicts or gang members, fundamentalist evangelicals or Trump supporters, whoever your bogeymen are. Well, they're invited anyway. The invitation doesn't depend on the worth of the guest but the boundless love of the host. You, and they, can always say no. But please don't. Please accept God's invitation – it won't be the same for any of us without you.

When I find myself awake at 3am listening to those goblins whispering in my ear there is one way I know to shut them up. It's to pray the simplest of prayers. The words don't matter, There is just something about allowing the divine fountain of living water to splash over you that distresses goblins and washes their lies from your heart. Prayer reminds you that you don't have to rely on your own cracked cisterns but that there is a fountain of lifegiving love always within reach. Let it give you the courage to live a life that is true to yourself, that is full of feeling and friendship, that allows you to be happy. Let it give you the courage to accept the invitation to God's party and to dance your life as if no one is watching.

ⁱ I most recently came across this suggestion in Brian McLaren's *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything*, pages 144-46.