

## From talk given by Vivienne Nelson on 17 January, 2014

The Sunday before Christmas here at the Cathedral, the sermon touched on the “God moments” we have in our lives. They make us say, “Ah, that’s where that comes from!” or “Where did that come from?” Later that same morning, Mel and I were having coffee at Bank Corner Cafe and I was reading Saturday’s Herald where there was a picture of the cathedral and the Dean in an article headed, “*New lease of life for park*”. The article, which set out some of the history of Cathedral Park, told of the shipwreck in 1866 of an iron paddle-steamer, the Cawarra, in which 61 people drowned near the former island of Nobbys. 31 of those people were buried in a mass grave at the lower end of what was called the “Old Burial Ground.

Reading this shocked me as, a few years ago when I was doing a series of eight paintings from east to west of the views from the north side of the cathedral, I became aware of an atmosphere of sadness at that same end of the ‘park’ that disturbed me. I think this feeling comes out in my painting of the row of trees with what artists call “negative spaces”



between them (Image of my painting shown). The row of trees I painted have since been removed.

One of the themes in my work is the spaces between things. I think that God can often be found in these spaces, or in quiet or silence.....it’s a bit like the Leonard Cohen song, “There’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”

Anyway, back to the Herald article I was reading - I asked the cafe owner if I could keep the newspaper and told him why and he said, “Sure, it’s yesterday’s paper, and I think you both need another cup of coffee!”

We have Quiet Mornings at the Cathedral about 6 times a year, and at one the theme was “God as a cloud”, with the idea that a cloud can be a metaphor for God....as in the medieval writing “The Cloud of Unknowing” and in “The dark night of the soul” by St John of the Cross, both about the darkness of God and examples of what is known in Western Christianity as the *via negativa*. Many painters have used clouds to signify God’s hidden presence, as have a number of biblical writers.....

At one of these Quiet Mornings we looked at the poetry of Kevin Hart, a contemporary Australian poet. I liked his poetry so much I asked Mel for a book of his poetry for

Christmas. It was hard to find but he got hold of a collection called "Morning Knowledge". A lot of the poems are grieving the loss of his father, and he uses the words "Dark One" as an image for God that appealed to me. I will read one to you.

My gentle father died when day was young,  
When there was very little left to take:  
Gray face, a raft of bones, a bitter ache,  
A word or two still living on my tongue.

There's bread that only dying men can eat,  
Worn words that only weary men can say.  
Sometimes those wispy words just slip away,  
Sometimes that gritty bread falls on a sheet.

In those last days my dad ate nothing much;  
His words were mostly gnawing at warm air.  
Dark One, I'll be the one to smooth his hair.  
You be the one who lets him know my touch.

Two Wednesdays a month I am a volunteer at our cathedral shop which is open every day to welcome visitors to the cathedral and maybe to sell them an item or two from the shop. I'm rostered on with Anne who came here from Camden two years ago after running a successful florist shop, knowing everyone and, of course, making wreaths for funerals in the town and district. Anne told me she once had to create a flower sculpture-wreath of an alligator for a local crim's casket!

We have a nice time talking together in the lulls between visitors and customers. Six months ago she told me her daughter had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer and had only a matter of months to live. Anne kept coming till it was too hard to cope with her grief, and I didn't see her again until a few of us from the shop together with the Dean attended her daughter's funeral just before Christmas at the Catholic Cathedral. She has just returned to the roster and we have been together once again at the shop.

I am telling you Anne's story because it's an example of how God's Spirit works when you make yourself available and just "rest". Being on the shop can be like resting in time as sometimes only a few people come in and you are almost invisible and time passes slowly. It was then Anne asked me (and others) to "just pray as it's all she's got now" referring to her daughter. In other words, she had handed her daughter over to God's care.

I know when I make time and space for prayer - either in saying Morning Prayer with Mel or taking time to be in my studio and being silent and still - that's when I am at my most attentive. It's then that I am reminded by that "still small voice" to ring someone who needs a call, to visit someone who may be trapped in coping with an illness.

In being with someone who is dying as in the Kevin Hart poem - in the "negative space" of it - the Dark One is made known.....

Dark One, I'll be the one to smooth his hair.  
You be the one who lets him know my touch.

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