

A Soul's Dark Journey: Graced Beyond Telling

15 February 2024, St Thomas the Apostle School Hall, 67 Central Road, Blackburn

It is a privilege to be invited by Corrie to launch her book. Furthermore, I am going to suggest, the nature of this book is such, that a journey through its pages will also be a privilege for each reader. It seems appropriate that this occasion is the first event to mark the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Missionary Sisters of Service.

The foundations of this book, which give it its strength and authenticity, are Corrie's journals, written faithfully for some 45 years. Being called to journalling was a 'lightbulb' moment for Corrie and profoundly influenced her spiritual journey and ultimately gave us this inspirational book. Through her journalling, she became "aware of the extraordinary power of words".¹ This realisation has been reinforced in the re-reading of her journals half a lifetime after some of them were written and in Corrie capturing their essence in this book.

Corrie recounts that in her early years as a Missionary Sisters of Service, she "realised the poverty of [her] skills in English". She expresses her gratitude to Fr John Wallis, the founder of the Missionary Sisters of Service, for teaching her "the finer skills of good writing" which underpin the riches of her journals and the journey recorded in *Grace Beyond Telling*. It is the story of her becoming "the Corrie [God] made [her] to be". "Love and gratitude ... pervade [her] journals" and correspondingly this volume.²

This book recounts Corrie's parallel journeys – an historical journey on the highways and byways with the Missionary Sisters of Service and a spiritual journey of understanding her place in the Cosmos. She writes: "This book is first of all the story of grace, of God's gracious working in my life ... Only secondarily is it **my** story".³

Her two stories begin with the 'hidden' event of Corrie's birth in 1939 in the Netherlands against the increasingly global event that was World War II. Her childhood is uprooted when in the 1950s her family emigrates to Australia and makes a new life in rural Tasmania. Here she meets the Home Missionary Sisters of Our Lady, discovers her vocation and goes out into the highways and byways. She recounts that she loved the mission life and her experiences of the country. At the same time Corrie's arduous spiritual journey is unfolding, accompanied and enriched by her deeply honest and revealing journalling. She identifies an innate hunger for learning in herself – this influences both her journeys.

Interspersed with Corrie's spiritual journey and "growing self-awareness" are various congregational assignments and leadership roles. There are opportunities to study theology, to explore her Dutch and Australian identities, to get to know Indigenous Australians, to be drawn into the Australian psyche, and to train as a counsellor. The latter practice enabled Corrie to support the wounded, including survivors of sexual abuse. She sought to help them understand that healing comes through forgiveness; she writes: "The act of forgiving transforms us and set us free". The nature of her own spiritual journey enriched this ministry.⁴

Corrie's writing is informed by reading widely across diverse fields, like theology, spirituality, literature, physics, poetry, ecology and cosmology. With great honesty and humility, she explores profound themes such as the mystery of "the Word made flesh" and of the Trinity. She writes:

¹ C. van den Bosch (2023) *A Soul's Dark Journey: Graced Beyond Telling* (Melbourne: Coventry Press), p. 20.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21, 23 and 27, respectively.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 36 and 121, respectively.

As I reflect on the unfolding Mystery of the Trinity in the context of my life, I see that the seed of these insights was sown in me many years earlier ... [it] set me on the journey of probing the mystery of the Incarnation. As I grew into a living incarnational spirituality, I was led into the Mystery of the Trinity.

She challenges us with the following: “Mysticism is for everyone ... The mystic is one who sees with the eye of the heart, the eye of love”.⁵

Corrie incorporates rich images into her writing – for example, she has a reflection on the pearl of great price. A pearl emerges from an irritable grain of sand in an oyster – the imagery of this evolution, she writes, is a powerful symbol of a life lived to the full. In another chapter Corrie challenges the Church to be less focused on rules and regulations but rather to develop its capacity to respond to the needs of those served: its “response-ability”. One chapter has the tantalising title: “The awesome mission of being human”!⁶

In some instances, Corrie’s journal explorations are in the form of a conversation with God – this one from 1986 I found particularly powerful:

It is as though my love for you is not just mine, but the human family’s of which I am a member. You ache for this human family, and in it you are crucified yet again. Thinking of all the people who suffer and are oppressed in one way or another, I said:

– Lord, what can I do?

– Nothing!

– Nothing? Then I might as well go running barefoot in the grass!

– No indeed! You must stay here, with the suffering people. Be as powerless as I am. And love them. This is the only hope they have.

It strikes me that I always want to do something, even if only to put on a band-aid to cover the sore. You are saying that real love is to bleed with them. I hardly dare to write it. Is that what it means to be crucified with you?

This means I must surrender my private little world, the world to which I can retire and from which I can shut out what I want to shut out ... Your invitation is to be with them, powerless as you are powerless in their powerlessness, and there to love them as you love me and as you love them.

Later Corrie writes: “The Crucified One tells me that to become fully human I need to empty myself to make space for others and THE Other”.⁷

Towards the end of the book, Corrie has a reflection which, I would suggest, offers timely guidance to other religious institutes going to fulfilment. Looking at the passage from the Gospel of John: “It is for your good that I go” (John 16:7), she reflects on the MSS journey to fulfilment and how the Sisters have been preparing for this. In particular, she had put together a ritual for the 2018 Missionary Sisters of Service Chapter. She writes: “The ritual encapsulated the heart of the present phase of MSS ... it made real the urgency of self-surrender, emptying ourselves of all vestiges of clinging to the charism ... trusting the Spirit” and anointing lay colleagues to grasp the MSS “charism as truly their own” and take “the MSS mission purposefully into the future”.⁸ The flowering of the Second Vatican Council’s teaching has always been integral to Fr John Wallis’ and

⁵ Ibid., pp. 24-25, 139-140, 142 and 143, respectively.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 122-124, 38 and 131-137, respectively.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 50-51 and 177, respectively.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 167-168.

the MSS' vision. Corrie's reflection recounted above captures how the congregation's journey to fulfilment is intertwined with the coming to fruition of the baptismal call of the laity.

In this book, Corrie captures in words the nature of her warmth that we all know and appreciate; she speaks of an experience which "cracked open [her] heart and released capacities for love, warmth and affection". She also reveals to the reader her vulnerabilities, her "years of disintegration and of gradually being rebuilt". She writes: "Looking back, I can see ... slow transforming grace at work in me, not by my doing, but by the Spirit of the One who pours himself out in tender Love and Mercy, for the life of the world". She goes on to say: "Reading and reflecting on my journals has been something of a pilgrimage for me, an amazing journey ... discovering that, in all my dark, confusing times, Wisdom was secretly at work, creating a work of art out of the messiness of my life".⁹

In the first instance, Corrie observes that she needed to write the book for herself: "While I was going about my ordinary daily life, unbeknown to me, the One who is mighty was doing great things in me. I needed to write this story ... It is my hope and prayer that my journal journey may serve as something of a mirror in which readers may recognise more deeply the Spirit's working in their own lives".¹⁰

This is "a story of God's grace, of the joys and griefs, the living and dying of daily experience".¹¹ As was Corrie's hope, it is indeed a story to which the reader can relate – those who have already read the book have observed, perhaps with somewhat of a sense of amazement: "This feels rather like my own journey!" As one reader put it: Corrie's "story speaks to our own stories" (Madeleine Duckett rsm); another observed: "I was inspired to reflect upon my own memories" (Fiona Basile).

While our contemporary society is increasingly secular, there is growing interest in exploring and deepening personal spirituality – this is a book for our times. *Graced Beyond Telling*, Corrie's account of her life-long spiritual journey, offers a 'lighthouse' for those on this voyage of discovery. I highly recommend her engaging account of God working in her life.

I acknowledge Hugh McGinlay of Coventry Press who worked with Corrie to present this attractive and accessible volume. In Corrie's manuscript, he recognised, and has made available to all of us, a 'pearl of great price'.

Let me conclude with the words that Corrie wrote in the copy of the book which she presented to me: "May you, too, know yourself graced beyond telling". I have great pleasure in launching Corrie van den Bosch's *A Soul's Dark Journey: Graced Beyond Telling*.

Gabrielle McMullen AM
15 February 2024

⁹ Ibid., pp. 19, 35 and 178-179, respectively.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 181.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 8.