



Seeing through new lenses

Clay Nelson © 17 June 2018

Sometimes when I choose a sermon title a month in advance it is an act of faith that I will have something to say about it when the time comes. Today's was one such occasion. I knew it would be my first sermon upon my return from travelling to Athens and Geneva, both places I had never been. I trusted that the experience would educate, enlighten and engage me in such a way that my understanding of reality would not be the same when I returned. It had certainly been true after past travels. Like having cataract surgery or new glasses, I trusted that new lenses would expand my perspective of the world. I was not disappointed.

It is like having new eyes that can see things that have always been there but are unseen because our brains are fixed only to see what we have been conditioned to see. Most of us can see only one-thousandth of the light spectrum. Rarely do we see more than our mind will allow us — our brain has fixed our lenses to pick up only the familiar and the comfortable; in other words, we see things as black or white. It turns out that it is not “seeing is believing” is true, but “believing is seeing”.

We acquire knowledge and information through our five senses, primarily our eyes. We have to ask ourselves, “How much am I really seeing? Does the next person see differently from me?” The answer is yes.

Everyone has their own angle to look at the external world. For example, many people can witness the same beautiful sunset — but each person sees it differently because they themselves are different. One may be taken aback by the sky awash with multiple colours while another may feel the warmth of the golden yellows and pinks. Still another may not focus on the colours, but instead be reminded of a childhood memory. And yet, ironically, we still see sunset colours only in black and white.

As with many things in life, it's all about perspective. One pearl of wisdom observes that our lives are a mere reflection of our perspective. I'm sure you don't doubt it. Just think about how you handle money. Are you a saver or spender or somewhere in between? Your attitudes about money were probably shaped early in your childhood by how your parents dealt with money. The same can be said of ways to parent, the value of education, who to love and how to love them, involvement in organised religion, being a good employee or employer, the role of unions, what political party represents you best, and all the other activities of being social beings. They are also a reflection of our privilege or lack of it — of our nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability and other aspects of who we are that were not our choice but determined by our birth or by other circumstances. Our perspective affects our choices that, in turn, provide a portrait of our life.

Our trip to Athens and Geneva went a long way towards painting a portrait of my life that is less black and white and more nuanced and interesting than before I left.

The two cities were very different lenses. So different they could serve as monocles, but juxtaposed together each widened my perspective further than they might have alone.

Athens is bursting with energy. Due to high levels of unemployment, poverty and being the gateway to Europe for war refugees, it seems like everybody is hustling to make a Euro, that

they might survive another day. There is no sense of order: be it the traffic on winding, narrow streets competing with pedestrians who share the space; those hawking their wares or services to tourists eating souvlaki in outdoor cafes; the bustling street bazaars, the myriad buildings from different centuries, in varied states of disrepair jammed into every nook and cranny abutting ancient ruins; the graffiti covering every flat surface to be found (I was pleased the Parthenon has not been tagged yet).

Yet, as chaotic as it seems, it all works. Perhaps it is due to the majestic Acropolis guarding this ancient city, giving a perspective only something that has experienced 5000 years of human history can offer. Our 116 year-old sanctuary has a way to go. Perhaps it is the memory of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle walking with students in the Ancient Agora that reminds modern Athenians to be philosophical about life's meaning and purpose. After all they have had some good times in the midst of the many bad ones. They have been tyrannised by kings, suffered draconian laws by their own leaders, been drained of wealth by the church, oppressed by empires for centuries at a time, torn apart by class strife, burned out and sacked by wars, and more recently occupied by Hitler and impoverished by European Union monetary policy. Yet, they still thrive miraculously as a modern city of over 3 million people. Perhaps they manage it by remembering that during the Age of Pericles in the 5th century BC they laid the foundations of western civilisation and planted democratic ideals into rocky soil that, in spite of all, took root.

With all this before me it occurred that the Athenian Marathon is not just a race but a state of mind. It is a metaphor for keeping a long view. We all have a role to play now in whatever context we were born in, but humanity's long journey didn't begin with us, nor will it end with us. In our time we face what sometimes seem like overwhelming threats beyond our control. Climate change and destruction of the environment being only one. The Athenian lens reminds me to take heart in our human capacity to endure and do what we can to make the world a more hospitable place. It reminds me that ideals, such as those in our seven principles, can be enough to make us run one more mile of the marathon of life.

Leaving Athens for Geneva was like travelling to a different solar system, so different were they in appearance and tenor. While Athens had an internal order barely visible, Geneva wore order like an expensive gown. Except in the old city, the streets were broad boulevards, carefully laid out, filled with trams, busses, and expensive cars. Gardens and green spaces were everywhere, often filled with public art. Everything seemed clean and neat with window boxes decorating hotels and apartment buildings with flowers. Even the red light district and neighbourhoods settled by the recent influx of immigrants refused to be seedy and graffiti was rare. Pedestrians had plenty of room on wide footpaths and were respectful of crossing with the lights. Buildings were much newer outside the old city, few older than the mid-19th century, and were well maintained. Public transport was clean, comfortable and efficient. A wealthy city at the base of the Alps and nestled along the shore of Europe's largest lake, poverty was minimal or at least well hidden.

As Rachel was working as many as 17-hour days at the impressive UN palace on a new Geneva Convention to make workplaces safe from violence and harassment and we were there for two weeks, I had plenty of time to explore the city. If there was a museum of history, art, natural history, science and technology, human rights, or religion, I probably visited it. I did pass on the museum featuring the 500-year history of the watch.

If it weren't for the Cathedral of St Pierre, I could've been convinced the city had been created by Walt Disney to be one of its amusement parks that proclaim themselves to be the happiest place on earth. The cathedral stands at the highest spot in Geneva and reveals that what we see today was born of two millennia of religious strife and a strong desire by Genevans for independence and freedom.

The neo-gothic cathedral was built 300 years before the Reformation and in its architecture looks like many cathedrals of the period; however, it had been stripped of most of its ornamentation after John Calvin brought his version of rigorous religious reform to Geneva. In particular the importance of the altar was reduced by the addition of a large pulpit. The severity of the religion was captured in Calvin's chair. Not a throne like the ones the bishops sat on but a diminutive wooden chair clearly not made for comfort during long sermons. I did not spend long there as there was little to see and what there was I expected to see. It wasn't until I left that I saw that there was an architectural site under the cathedral. I paid my five francs and spent the next two hours exploring over 2000 years of religious observance that had occurred on the site.

The present cathedral had been built on top of the ruins of three cathedrals that once sat side by side. They in turn were built over Celtic ruins that long preceded Julius Caesar's encampment in Geneva in 58 BC. As I descended layer by layer into the site I was struck by how much religion was shaped not only by those who came before but by whatever was the present culture. It wasn't always that the religion of the day shaped society, but vice versa as well.

My other observation was that diversity comes at a cost. Geneva's religious history was fairly peaceful until Geneva, which declared herself a city of refuge, welcomed the protestant Huguenots being run out of France. With them came John Calvin. This dour Protestant would eventually be the spiritual leader of Geneva. This was not welcomed by the Catholics and their political allies, but the new religion became quite popular and 13 years after his arrival Genevans declared themselves a Protestant city. It would be from Geneva that Protestantism in its many forms would largely be spread around the globe.

Unitarianism was one of those variants of the Reformation, but ironically, it suffered at the hands of Calvin. Michael Servetus, who wrote tracts against the Trinity, united Calvin and the Catholic inquisition in their desire to silence him and his heresy. Together they arrested, tried and burned him at the stake, making him the first Unitarian martyr. As his ashes were scattered there is no burial site, but I did go in search of a memorial to him marked by his statue. The statue evokes a poignancy over religion's ability to bring out the best and the worst in humankind. I left with the sense that we cannot just put a new gown on abuse sanctioned by religion and pretend it isn't true. That was the gift of a new lens Geneva offered me. Even in an increasingly secular New Zealand destructive religious values persist, as they were brought here by our forebears. Occasionally they exist openly as in our resistance to adopt separation of church and state, but for the most part they are to found just below the surface in our culture protecting privilege at the expense of the vulnerable.

I suspect that some form of religion will always be a part of the human experience, but may we see clearly with new lenses how to make it more compassionate, liberating and just. We are well-positioned to keep religion honest. At least we can try during our moment of running the marathon.