



Worship at St. Stephens Williamstown

Notes for St Stephen's – 20 September 2020. Ross Howie

Prayer

In our homes separated from each other, in this virtual gathering of St Stephen's congregation, as people of faith, we bring our minds to consider what understanding of God and of life might open to us, and to uphold each other.

We are thankful O God, if we have been able to go for a walk, when we have been able to see the beauty of the sky, if we have been able to talk to a friend or hear from a family member or even see someone dear to us on video phone or zoom, if we have read or heard on radio or seen on screen something that has stimulated our interest, or made us laugh, or even enthralled us, if we have slept well, if the wonder of today's technology has blessed us. Amen

Hymn

If we were to sing we might sing this hymn, which I was not aware of until a friend recently brought it to my attention. It is a hymn by Frederick Pratt Green, and seemed apt for the times. **TIS 638**

O Christ, the healer, we have come
to pray for health, to plead for friends.
How can we fail to be restored
when reached by love that never ends?

Scripture readings

Exodus 16:1-36
Philippians 1: 1-11
Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45
Matthew 20:1-16

Reflection

The Gospel reading set for today Matthew 20:1-16 is one of the parables which Jesus used to teach his disciples and listeners. I have often been struck how curious these stories are, and wondered how he thought them up. There is something brilliant about them as a teaching tool. They have upon them "the stamp of a highly individual mind".

I have long understood a parable to be a story told to make just one point, so clearly that the hearer will remember the story and get the point. So what is the point of this story?

It comes in Matthew's narrative after Jesus had been challenged by his disciples to address a number of serious questions, ethical questions – about divorce, marriage, the place of children rebuked by disciples, the gaining of eternal life, the limits of wealth, and,

importantly, ambition, what was in it for the disciples. In the previous chapter Peter asserted: “We have left everything to become your followers. What will there be for us? (19:27)

The parable begins, “The kingdom of Heaven is like this.” So there is a preliminary question. What is he talking about when he talks about the “kingdom of Heaven”? The expression “the kingdom of Heaven” used in Matthew’s gospel has the same meaning as the expression “the kingdom of God” used in the other gospels. It is the community where God governs, the society where God reigns in the lives of people. Since returning from his experience in the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and nights and was challenged by powerful temptations, Jesus message was “the kingdom of Heaven is upon you” (Mt.4:17); “set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else” (Mt.6:33); “be sure the kingdom of God has already come upon you” (Mt.12:28). It is not about the future. It is about now, how are we as people of faith to live.

In this story, the workers who did not start until late in the day are paid the same amount as those who have worked all day. It is not a story about industrial relations, fair dealing between bosses and workers, a matter to be resolved by the Fair Work Commission. No, he is saying to Peter, who has asked, “What will be there for us?”, don’t get ahead of yourself, the community gathered by the rule of God is not limited to you, there are others, outside of your group, who you may not think have as much importance as you think you have. “The last shall be first, and the first last.”

This story was not written for us. But what does it say to us? How much has the history of the Christian church been a story of one group regarding itself as having a special place, a superior understanding, an exclusive claim to the truth, something that was there for them. This parable says to us, wait a minute, God in his grace recognises others, late-comers, those who come at a different time, those who are different, even those who may be looked down upon. God can turn the order of who is important on its head. We are all part of a community of faith, responding to God’s grace to us.

It’s about God’s generosity, unmerited the Bible tells us, but given over and above what may be expected or deserved. What can our response be but to be grateful, be generous ourselves and in the humblest way possible allow our lives to make a difference.

Verses 4 and 5 in today’s **Psalm (105)** encourage us.

Seek the Lord and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he uttered.

So does Paul in **Philippians 1:3** – “I thank God whenever I think of you; and when I pray for you all, my prayers are always joyful, because of the part you have taken in the work of the Gospel from the first day until now.”

On the other hand, the **Exodus** reading is a story about complaining. Having escaped from slavery in Egypt the Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron “you have brought us out into this wilderness to let us starve to death.” Leadership can be a heavy burden, a tough job.

Something that has encouraged me in this lockdown time has been to read again the long biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer written by his friend and colleague Ebehard Bethge. I have been interested to see how he managed living in such dark and difficult times. His life was not long. Born in 1906, he died on 9 April 1945, just 37 years of age, and only three weeks before Berlin was captured by the Soviet army.

Although he was one of eight children in a loving family, his father being a professor of psychiatry and neurology in Berlin, it is hard to imagine too many more difficult times than those confronting a Christian pastor in Germany following the rise to power of Hitler and National Socialism in 1933. These dark times included victimisation of Jewish people, excluding them from the civil service, and from professions, seizure of property, public brutality, deportation to concentration camps, adoration of the Fuhrer, war, conscription, bombing, and a largely (but not completely) compliant, nationalistic, authoritarian and anti-semitic church.

In 1940 Bonhoeffer became an active member of a group of people committed to the overthrow of the Nazi regime. As a consequence he was arrested on 5 April 1943, spent the next 18 months until 8 October 1944 in Tegel prison in Berlin, when he was transferred to the cells in Gestapo headquarters in Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, where he remained until 7 February 1945, and after being moved to several different places, was executed at Flossenburg on 9 April 1945.

In that period of two years imprisonment, with weeks of intense interrogation, he faced fear, stress, loneliness, and uncertainty. It is said that (1) he was cheerful with fellow prisoners and guards; (2) he kept to the daily practice of Bible reading, prayer and meditation, glad that he knew by heart so many hymns of Paul Gerhardt; (3) he kept to a work schedule of reading, thinking, writing; (4) he chose to be thankful. A fellow prisoner later wrote, “he had joy in every smallest event in life and deep gratitude for the mere fact he was alive”. (It made me think of the late Paddy Garrity, a neighbour of St Stephens on the other side of Melbourne Road, who died on 16 August from Covid 19, of whom it was said, “he was a glory of a person, just happiness on legs”.)

His example in difficult times may have something to say to us.

TIS 617 is a translation by Frederick Pratt Green of a poem Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his mother from Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse on 28 December 1944, for her birthday and for the New Year.

By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,
and confidently waiting come what may,

we know that God is with us night and morning
and never fails to greet us each new day.

Yet in this heart by the old year tormented,
still evil days brings burdens hard to bear.
O give our frightened souls the sure salvation
for which, O Lord, you taught us to prepare.

And when this cup you give is filled to brimming
with bitter suffering, hard to understand,
we take it thankfully and without trembling
out of so good, and so beloved, a hand.

Yet when again, in this same world, you give us
the joy we had, the brightness of your sun,
we shall remember all the days we lived through,
and our whole life shall then be yours alone.

Prayers of intercession

What do we ask of God for others and for ourselves.

Spirit of Christ, when we are afraid may we have courage; when anxious settle our minds; when we feel deeply vulnerable remind us of those who deeply care for us; when we feel frustrated grant us patience; when we think we are bored stimulate us to think of satisfying things worth doing; when we are lonely or in pain or uncertain about the future comfort us by the awareness of your presence and love.

We pray for those who bear the particular responsibilities and risks of care and leadership – health care workers, age care workers, nurses, doctors, centrelink workers, police officers, and others for whom we are concerned. We pray for them with gratitude, and ask for them encouragement, strength and the wisdom and the skills they need. We pray this too for the Premier Dan Andrews and those who advise him. Amen

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

TIS 780 SING THIS OUT LOUD

May light come into your eyes,
may hope spring up in your heart,
may peace guide all of your mind,
and keep you in God; and keep you in God.