

**Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain**  
**15 June 2008**

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35-10:8

Some Celtic wisdom:  
(*Carmine Gadelica*)

I saw a stranger yestere'en;  
I put food in the eating place,  
drink in the drinking place  
and in the sacred name of three,  
he blessed myself and my house,  
my cattle and my dear ones,  
and the blackbird sang outside,  
'often goes the Christ in guise  
of a stranger'.

Abraham and Sarah had visitors, and in true eastern style they treated them to a feast – how were they to know these guests were messengers, who would speak with the voice of God? Yet as was their want they treated them royally anyway – with compassion and generosity.

And Sarah laughed at the impossibility of what they suggested – that she, an old woman way past menopause, and Abraham, an old man that he was, would be fruitful! Of course she laughed ... though the promise had been there, from the beginning, and she had tried to make it happen in other ways. The absurdity of it – yet here they were, the messengers, affirming that the promise would be fulfilled, and soon ... a mother of many nations. When hope seems laughable God bestows new life.

'Often goes the Christ in guise of a stranger'.

And we read of the Christ, Jesus, seeing his people 'harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd' and he is deeply moved – with the urgency of spreading the message; of caring for them.

people are ready  
ripe for harvest –  
There's no time for mucking around –  
The fields must be harvested now  
Like Moses he commissions successors to get out there –  
They are named ...  
and our names are hidden in there too.

He calls them to speak, to tell the story – to be God's healing presence in the world – to bring life in unexpected places, like Abraham and Sarah's three visitors, and to receive hospitality.

The visitors came and were treated with generosity and respect.

They brought a message – unbelievable – a message of life – new life.

Jesus' compassionate healing empowered others to share his story – that God is near, nearer than we realise. The message is urgent and clear. We too are to be Christ bearers, God bearers, and be open to the God in others, to respond with openness and generosity to those we meet.

The messengers to Abraham and Sarah were enabled to share their message after sharing a meal.

Sarah, of course, laughed – at what seemed impossible. She laughed, and went on laughing, and people will laugh at us.

‘Healing is impossible’ they’ll say.

‘Life is impossible – in this relationship, this situation – you have got to be joking!  
life!? – for me? now?’

Our answer to them must be a resounding yes – a life-affirming, healing, always, yes!

That does not mean we won’t die. It does not mean we will avoid illness. It does not mean we will steer clear of sticky situations. But, it does mean we are not alone. It means we can face difficulties with other possibilities – with hope and strength and community.

In yesterday’s SMH there was a Michael Leunig cartoon that went like this:

There they were in the doctor’s waiting room; each with their own sickness.

Bob with his bobolosis

Emma with emmaditis

Peter with peterenterities

Freda with fredamania

Mavis with mavis fever

Harry with harry’s syndrome.

Each of them suffering from being who they are: each seeking a cure for the ordinary oddness of existence.

But alas, the doctor can’t see anyone today. He’s slumped in his chair suffering from acute doctor phobia.

There is no cure for anyone. Eventually everyone becomes FULL BLOWN.

Our task, I suggest, is to embody the compassion of Jesus to stand alongside, to be with, to encourage, affirm, care, release, to allow people to be who they are – rather than seeking a cure for the ‘ordinary oddness of existence’ .

To demonstrate they are okay – and loved ‘with no conditions ...’

What are some practical examples of this?

On Friday night I saw the musical *Billy Elliott*. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Set during the miners strike in Maggie Thatcher’s England, young Billy Elliott is eventually enabled to use his gifts, his talent, his passion – and dance – and is supported by the struggling mining community to attend his audition with the royal ballet. His teacher supports him, and strikers dig deep, as does a scab worker. They all pull together for this vision for Billy and contribute financially – to Billy’s humanity – his healing – and this empowers them. It’s wonderful!

In contrast to this community of care, I read an article by Mark Davis challenging some unhelpful behaviour in our society.

### **Priest puts PM's public service work ethic in the sin bin**

Mark Davis Political Correspondent  
June 14, 2008

WHEN the Prime Minister burns the midnight oil and insists that Canberra's public servants follow suit he may be leading the nation into sin, a Jesuit theologian says.

Father Andrew Hamilton argues that overwork is morally unjustifiable - "in old fashioned Catholic terms it may be a sin" - and that Kevin Rudd has a special responsibility not to encourage such behaviour.

In an article in the online Jesuit magazine *Eureka Street*, Father Hamilton says Catholic moralists were traditionally more perturbed by the dangers of sloth than excessive work. With the advent of the industrial revolution their concerns shifted to the exploitation of workers in factories and mines.

Now a new ethical problem has emerged: the white-collar worker spending too many hours in front of a computer. "What makes overwork morally unjustifiable is that the time and attention we give to it is disproportionate," Father Hamilton says.

"If the way in which we work does not offer us space to nurture the significant relationships in our lives, to explore our other gifts, to contribute to our communities and to reflect on the meaning and direction of our lives, we are likely to be overworking."

Father Hamilton, who teaches at the United Faculty of Theology in Melbourne, says the culture of many workplaces encourages employees to idealise overwork.

"So those who encourage an environment that makes overwork seem normal and demand that their employees fit into it carry a heavier moral responsibility," he says. "Overwork is particularly dangerous in the public service because public servants must consider the human dignity of those affected by the regulations they frame.

"They cannot reliably do this if they or their masters regard as expendable respect for their own dignity. If overwork is a sin, Mr Rudd ( and we have) no business promoting it."

The Sydney Morning Herald

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/priest-puts-pms-public-service-work-ethic-in-the-sin-bin/2008/06/13/1213321620649.html>

Challenging, isn't it?

What is to be our witness here?

What is the good news?

Where is the healing in this situation?

For whom do you have compassion?

Where do you bring healing?

Where do you tell the story of God's way?

Some stories:    Wedding – warm memories of baptism;  
                         Macquarie and Aranda Primary Schools;  
                         Ecological foot print.

Jesus commissioned disciples to tell the story,  
and to be a healing presence in the world  
and to make disciples – learners ...  
people who will join a learning community and carry on learning – life-long.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, we find Jesus telling his representatives to go and do what he did as a representative of God. Make learners! What were they to learn? Precisely what they had learned from Jesus! And what was that? Taking a look at Jesus' teaching, we find an important clue in the final words of Jesus' public ministry in Matthew, because they sum up his message: his parable about outcomes-based assessment in 25:31-46. The sheep are those who care about other

human beings, not for special rewards not because they imagine they are helping Jesus, but simply because love is called for. Recognition and reward even surprise them. What matters in the end is being a compassionate person.

If we move backwards, rapidly, through Matthew's gospel, we pass the talents and oil parables which tell us to keep this love alight and alive. We pass through warnings and encouragements and lots of real-life examples to a scene where Jesus sits on a mountain like Moses, and like Moses, speaks about God's law (5:1-2). There we see that the learning is about going backwards behind commands to attitudes: behind murder to hate; behind adultery to lustful exploitation; behind oaths to straightforward honest talk. Hate and revenge must go and love and reconciliation come. Jesus' strategy, however, is not to set up ideals, but to create communities of learners where the experience of love breeds love and generates the change that the world needs.

Reading Matthew from the End

William Loader

*Seasons of the Spirit™ Congregational Life Pentecost 1 (p.57)*

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'Often goes the Christ in guise of a stranger'.