

Sermon Stewardship 30 June 2013
Revd Susanna Pain
Generous Giving
Luke 9:51-62

Let me tell you a little of a week in the life of a parish priest, a priest on the road. A little different, perhaps from politics, but none the less important for the wellbeing of the nation, I think! When reflecting on the readings for today one cannot help comparing and contrasting with Australian politics this week, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and his disciples.

Here are a few stories from my week:

What a rich time it was for me, full of real conversations with real people, people in hospital, dying, and healing, people in spiritual direction facing important challenges and seeking God's presence in it all, people at the Eucharist, and meditation, people in a study group...

I visited people in three different hospitals this week. I made a number of visits to a man in hospital, one of our Covenant Care guests, who has had a close call with death. On Saturday, he didn't think he was long for this world. On Monday, we talked for ages about his life, and loves, and gratitude to God for his life, but he was quite weak. On Wednesday he was transferred to a new ward, but he didn't have time to say goodbye to a fellow patient in the acute ward, so, he walked from his new ward, back to the old, to catch up with his new friend! Wow! I was impressed. From wanting to die, he was now caring for others again!

A group of us went to Clare Lawlor's performance in Civic on Monday night. Clare is a parishioner at 10am. We went to support her, and enjoy her music. She shared her creativity with us, a gift God has given and she has nurtured. We are present with her, enjoying the fruits of her labour. I also enjoyed Cate and Rob Riley's exhibition at Belconnen Arts Centre, on my day off. Much food for thought.

On Wednesday we celebrated our usual weekly Eucharist in the chapel. There were about a dozen of us this week. Judith Ann had picked up Joyce from Narrabundah, after she had made us some delicious pumpkin soup. Gillian had made us some gluten free quiche. Bev Barnes set up the chapel, and marked the place of the Psalm in the books. Paul set up for communion. Bruce and others set the table. Many brought food to share. After the reading many of us shared our reflections. We enjoyed a meal after communion, and all, well almost all, helped with the washing up!

This was community in operation, receiving from God and from each other and in turn acting generously to support and listen to others.

On Thursday, I saw a person for spiritual direction who is about to start on a disability pension. He is cutting back his hours at work, and sees himself as being, rather than doing, being present to the marginalised people with whom he works, many of whom are also on disability pensions. They are equal and share from their vulnerability. We talked about the changes in his life, and about his financial fears of how he would pay the rent. We also recognized God's presence with him through it all, and his desire to trust, to have faith, based on his past experience of God's love.

On Friday, I received a letter from Phyl Holmes. Here it is, slightly edited:

I want to share this with you following on from our conversation on Tuesday. This morning I had a conversation that was quite disturbing. I had been praying about it as I knew there were going to be some issues. I was already a bit weary after 2 days work at Radford (which I did enjoy mostly).

So we went down to Ricardo's for a comfort coffee and found the Sullivans, Jill, Judith Ann, Wendy Rayner already there, so we joined them. A great distraction for me, I was so pleased I gave a quiet thanks to God. While

talking with Wendy I discovered she is not working at the moment - the end result of that conversation is that she is happy to be a Friday admin person till the end of the year. God works in mysterious ways!

It's these experiences that sustain me. I walked out of Ricardo's on a high.

I then went to see our 5 yo grandson perform at his first assembly and was greeted afterwards with lots of cuddles and kisses.

I have just had a conversation with a social worker who has put my mind completely at rest concerning the conversation earlier this morning. I am now basking in the afterglow of God's grace and my grandson's love.

On Thursday, I visited St John's Care. Spoke with someone from Uniting Church about Safe Shelter for homeless... Sarah's study group.

There is so much more I could tell. This is just a sample of my week.

I, with all I have encountered this week, am standing in the footprints of those who have gone before.

I recall again the words of sixteenth century mystic, reformer, and writer, Teresa of Avila (1515–1582):

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
...Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

I suppose the message I want to get across is the richness and diversity of Holy Covenant, as we seek to follow our gracious generous God who welcomes sinners, eats with those at the margins, pays the latecomers as much as the early risers, heals the sick, raises the dead, feeds and clothes the hungry, challenges the secure... and I want to invite you to commit or recommit to this vision as expressed in our strategic plan so we can do likewise, and employ staff to facilitate and support your ministry in the world, and keep our buildings and surrounds safe, beautiful and accessible.

Our focus areas these next three years are:

ministry to those in the community who need extra support;
growing people in faith and commitment;
planning to respond to growth.

This year:

Godly Play Atrium - a room specially set up for Godly Play;
improving our communications - expanding website, and network on site;
exploring idea of drop in centre; and
how we can respond with others to homelessness...

Today is Financial Commitment Sunday, Stewardship Sunday, if you like.

I believe we experience “full life” when we practice stewardship, and to practice stewardship we must understand that it is totally about relationships.

Today is a time for reflecting on, and deciding on our financial commitment to Holy Covenant for the next twelve months, or until our circumstances change. Some will decide to give more, some less. For some of you this is an annual review, for others, this happens erratically, or as the spirit moves. Some are here for the first time, others have been here a few months, and are still sussing the place out, others have been here longer.

We receive money from no one other than you, for the running of the parish and paying the staff, and it is from your generosity, and the generosity of those who have gone before, that we thrive and are enabled to serve.

The Holistic Care Nursing (HCN) program, though, has received a bequest to assist isolated elderly people in the community and some of this has gone to establishing Covenant Care day hospice.

We currently employ the equivalent of only two fulltime ministry staff, though, in fact, we employ four people part-time, me, Sarah Macneil, Mark Beresford and Katherine Rainger, and each one also gives significant time voluntarily. We also employ a part-time, twelve hours per week, administrator, Paul Shelley for the last three years, and from this week, Kathy Lake.

Two one day per week holistic nurses are volunteers, as is HCN administrative assistant, and one nurse Nicole, is paid half a day a week. What a team! What richness enabled by your generosity.

Our Parish Council, musicians, and the hundreds who pray and serve on many rosters are volunteers! What a team!

We are fortunate indeed to be part of a vibrant, generous, loving, giving, growing community.

‘Our gospel passage deals with the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, the call to discipleship and what it means. In the story, James and John want Jesus to call down fire on the hostile Samaritan villagers, as Elijah did. Let's stamp out racism! they imply. Let's hate those who hate us! Jesus will have none of it... He sets violence aside as a solution to conflict.’

Loader

‘Then there are three encounters between Jesus and would be followers. Jesus did all the wrong things from a growth perspective. He was in danger of losing everyone if he carried on like that. Hanging alone on a cross is not success. ‘Son of Man’, the odd expression which the Greek foists upon us, means something like ‘the human being’ in Hebrew... The saying of Jesus belongs in the context of the journey upon which he is

embarked, a journey that will end on a cross - and then victory! It is the path of suffering. To join Jesus is to join the march for freedom, the journey for liberation, the path through danger to hope.

The second encounter shocks our sensibilities and sounds like the counsel of fanaticism. It is extreme, it seems deliberately so. It makes us want to wheedle our way out of its embarrassment and embroider some hidden motives into the man's request. Maybe his father was still alive? Hardly likely. Shock tactics can be offensive. This is doubtless meant to be offensive. It does not want to be explained and certainly not as a new way of treating parents. Its violence challenges family values with a higher claim of allegiance. It is not founding an institution or setting up a principle, but wresting control from cherished values so that we see another perspective.

It asserts God, the reign of God, not as a manipulation of fanaticism, but as the highest value. It can make sense as a call to radical compassion which may challenge all other calls to caring. Love remains, and sometimes it must break established priorities. Less dramatically, but just as relevant, people's dedication to 'family values' frequently blinds them to real caring and at worst, inspires hate and discrimination.

The third encounter, unique to Luke, functions as a counter piece to the introductory story based on Elijah. For in 9:61-62 Luke is reminding us of Elijah's call of Elisha (1 Kings 19:20). Elijah allowed Elisha to bid farewell to his folks. Not so Jesus! The image of the crooked furrow is graphic. A modern image might be what happens when people drive with their eyes glued to the rear vision mirror - the consequences are often more disastrous than crooked furrows.

Jesus is not driving a wedge between family and the kingdom of God, but he is indicating a conflict of interest. He often does so. This is fundamentally an 'invitation to a new kind of journeying, a new way of setting one's face for Jerusalem.' Loader - A journey of seeing the bigger picture and committing to love.

So here we are, two thousand years down the track. We are 'the face of God', the 'hands and feet and eyes and ears' of God today.

What does that mean for you? I've said a bit about what it means for me in my daily living this week.

Today, I invite you to consider your commitment to Christ as it is expressed in this community.

How much will I give?

What does 10% mean for me?

What is realistic and generous, and will make me feel good and free and not resentful?

How will I make a difference?

How will I follow in the footsteps of Jesus?

I direct debit my giving to Holy Covenant, and to Amnesty International, and Médecins Sans Frontières, among others. You?

How about this story:

At a church meeting a very wealthy man rose to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. "I'm a millionaire," he said, "and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I remember the turning point in my faith. I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God's work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today." He finished and there was an awed silence at his testimony as he moved toward his seat. As he sat down a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over and said to him: "I dare you to do it again."

A Sunday School teacher, not at Holy Covenant, was just finishing a lesson on honesty. "Do you know where little boys go

if they don't put their money in the collection plate?" the teacher asked.

"Yes ma'am," a boy blurted out. "They go to the movies."
Good answer! We all have a choice!

A would-be follower asks to follow Jesus. He will follow Jesus no matter where he goes. Jesus responds by talking about the difficulties of itinerant ministry. 'If you want to follow me, you might be homeless. The Jesus movement isn't necessarily easy.'

In God's kingdom, we are not defined by our past, but by our future, "the way" only goes forward.

http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2010/06/lectionary-blogging-luke-9-5162.html