

SERMON FOR EASTER 5

ST DAVIDS, ANGLICAN CHURCH, BURNSIDE

28 APRIL 2024

Someone asked me the other day 'What is it that you want to do whilst you are locum in the parish?' That is a good question deserving an answer. It's easy to fall into the trap of believing that people will know what you're about. But "*if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?*" 1 Cor 13.8. My answer is that I want parishioners to be refreshed in their love of Christianity and to refresh the parish's mission by becoming missionaries. This and other sermons are meant to be the trumpet sounding. But it begs another question, what is the parish's mission? Do we know what it is? Perhaps another trumpet call is required. And to be honest I want my time as locum to be successful.

Missionary service should be a mission of love grounded in the life of Jesus.

I was never a missionary in the usual understanding of that title. Joan was the missionary. Having enlisted with the Methodist Overseas Mission - New Zealand, her destination was to be the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. But we both did our work within the framework of missionary service. Missionary endeavours had then and perhaps still do have shortcomings. I experienced the puritanical approach of some missionaries who, as I look back on those days, applied their rigid understanding of Christianity in service to others. In so doing I believe they negated, could not see the possibility that God was expressing himself in more suitable and precise ways to those others he loved. An example of this is the dismantling of traditional dance and dress amongst south sea islanders and aboriginal Australians during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Conformity was the keystone to church membership and, I suggest, in today's church too, but less so perhaps. If less so, then I say thank goodness.

We should always remember the removal of Aboriginal children from their mothers, and more, because it's an example of people getting it wrong despite thinking Christian thoughts. We know better now and shudder at how such a thing was thought right and supported by Christian minded people. What makes for Christian service is in constant development and refinement. It is a known characteristic of God that the Holy Spirit encourages each generation to apply the teachings of Jesus appropriately in a changing environment. The gospel remains the same but how it is revealed changes through time and context.

So, with confidence I can say to you that we have entered into a necessary period requiring a fresh missionary response to our changing environment. I call it a period of refreshment. Refreshment in our thinking, refreshment in our understanding of what it means to be Christian, refreshment in our worship of the God who loves us to bits, and refreshment in the way we see the parish's

mission. If you doubt that then please reconsider, so that the prayer for today may be your prayer. *“O God form the minds of your faithful people, that we may love what you command and desire what you promise, so that, amid the many changes of this world, our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are to be found....”* You have every right to say that that is what we have been doing. What I say to you is that our world has changed and our participation in God’s mission needs to be refreshed to suit the changed context in which we live.

There is a place for us in this period of refreshment!

Consider why it is that the New Testament, post resurrection of Jesus, speaks often of love. Love of God, love of neighbour as oneself, love of doing right in the world, love of the stranger, love of Christian mission. Read again the second reading for today from 1 John 4.7-21 if you need reminding of love’s importance, for example *“Love has been perfected among us in this; that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, **because as he is, so are we in this world.**”*

Now love is an often-misused word. It is used to blanket many situations and mannerisms. C. S. Lewis in his book ‘The Four Loves’ was compulsory reading some years ago. Nevertheless, the word love in the New Testament is in essence expressing what is the substance and foundation of Christ’s life of service.

You will perhaps remember Prince Charles responding to a question put to him - I can’t remember the question - but I remember his answer, ‘What is love?’

For us to answer the question ‘What is love?’, we should consider its New Testament context. Naturally, we turn to what we personally know about God formed as it is by our experience of him, revealed in the history of the world, in the affairs of humanity recorded in the annals of every civilisation, in his dealings with us individually and as a congregation, and the God who reveals himself through the authors of the gospels and epistles. For example in the words of Jesus recorded by John in his gospel *“Let the world know that you have loved them even as you have loved me.”* John 17. 23, and in his first epistle *“we love because he first loved us.”* 1 John 4.10.

So, an answer to the question, “What is love?” will be our response to the necessary refreshment of parish mission and the actual manner of our missionary motivation, promotion, and practice as we embark upon it. What I think our mission is will be put before you next Sunday.

“If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” 1 Cor 13.8.

Fr John