

The Twenty-Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time – YrA – 22 October 2023

Message: *Proclaiming the Gospel – part II*

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, community, and mystical communion, may we know the Eternal Word and Way and may we reveal that way in our lives. **Amen.**

We continue the dance between Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities. Jesus's answer is more than just prudent. The response, '*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's*', is not as symmetrical as it sounds.

The denarius had the emperor's image and title upon it, both of which were offensive to the Jews. The image breaks the prohibition against graven images, the title proclaims the Cesar of day to be high priest of the divine. Nonetheless, we get the message; the functioning of society has a cost and we should pay our way for the common good.

In contrast, it is we humans, our collective humanity, male, female, and non-binary, that is made in the image of God. A facet of God's image is in each one of us and revealed when we love and care for one another. '*Give... to God the things that are God's*' is to say give our whole selves to God.

There is a hierarchy in this giving, we obey the civil authorities so long as doing so is consistent with giving ourselves to God. There are times when active resistance of the state is needed and we should all be engaged in shaping the world and society for a better today.

How are we to do this? How are we to reveal God's image to the world around us? We get a beautiful glimpse of this in Paul's greeting to the church of Thessalonica, both in Paul's behaviour among them and in the transformation that is seen in them as a community. As a Church community they are revealing the love of Christ to the community around them.

All this rather gracefully leads into part two of Brian McLaren's '*Do I stay Christian*'. Last week, I told you of ten reasons why people might not want to be a part of the church. This week, I offer you ten reasons why people might want to remain a part of the church.

If we have understood the way of Christ at all, we know that we are not church members primarily for our own benefit but for the benefit of others. We remain a part of the church in order to love and care for others, both those within the church and those without, we wound others if we leave.

Next, though change is painfully slow in the church, we can, and must, work for a better church, as Brian puts it, we don't have to leave defiantly or stay compliantly. We can stay defiantly and be a part of the change that is needed in order for the church to reflect the way of Christ in today's world.

Next, to borrow the words of St Peter, where else can we go (*John 6:68*). As flawed as the church is as the '*body of Christ*', and I don't think they are coterminous, nonetheless, where else are you going to find a gathering of followers of the way of Christ. There's enough variety out there that we should find at least one church we can be a part of.

Next, because it would be a shame to leave a religion in its infancy. We think of the church as ancient, yet the oldest

temples are five-thousand years old (*Temple of Ggantija, Malta*) and that on the timeline of humanity is but a moment, which itself is but a moment in the life of the earth, which is itself only a third of the life of the universe. Isn't it likely that in God's view, we are just at the start of our faith journey. We have so much potential, we need to keep going.

The next obvious reason is *because of our legendary founder*. Whatever it was that happened two-millennia ago, the Christ event, changed peoples' lives and inspired people to carry on telling the stories and parables of this life transforming teacher, born in a stable and put to death on a cross. Christ's teaching demands that we take it seriously.

The next reason requires humility; the church has too often painted itself as innocent, yet to borrow some familiar words, '*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone*'. We need to repent; we can repent as part of the church, on behalf of the church. The most powerful way of showing this repentance is by being in communion with those we have wounded and condemned in the past. The land wars are our obvious local example but it goes far beyond that.

A related reason is our humanity. The gospel never pretends that we are anything other than a bit of a mess, and that is on our good days. Church is about using the riches of our tradition to transform our lives, to live life in all its fullness and to help others do the same. No, we are not perfect at doing that, we need to change, but that is also part of the journey, a part of being church and a part of being human.

The next reason gives both hope and despair. Christianity is changing for better and for worse. There are huge tensions

within the church. As a denomination, we feel these acutely, a broad church trying to hold together the extremes, trying to move forward as a whole. Living in the midst of the major changes of the past was probably not that dissimilar to our own experiences. If we look around, we can see emerging a new church, an inclusive church, a humble church. We need to participate in the birth of that church, for every future generation.

Brian's penultimate reason is perhaps a little cheeky. We need to remain a part of the church *to free God*. We, the church, have created a false image of God. As chaplains often say to those who don't believe in God, *'I am fairly sure that I don't believe in the God you don't believe in either.'* Where is the humility, reverence, and awe, for God that could be the only response to Yahweh as described in today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures! When we reject, the false God we created, maybe others will want to join us in seeking out the glory of God.

Brian's final reason is a bit bleak; Fermi, inventor of the first nuclear reactor, wondered why, in the vastness of the universe, we haven't met other intelligent life forms. There are lots of ways of explaining this but one is known as the great filter. Simply put, perhaps intelligent life is always self-destructive. We certainly seem to have brought ourselves to the brink. In this light, faith focused on care for one another could be our last best hope. We remain a part of the church for the sake of humanity's continued existence. We love our neighbour, whomever they are, whether they have faith or no faith, regardless of any differences, because this is fullness of life for our neighbours and for every one of us.

And, so I return to Brian's suggested focus for a new way of being Church (Micha 6.8):

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Looking to the past, we can see that we have not been all that we should be. We have not sought justice for all; we have had to narrow a focus and often only sought justice for ourselves.

We have not always loved kindness, we may even view it as weak, to be strong is to not need the kindness of others, but that is also to not be human. We are made to love and be loved, only in love will we find fullness of life.

We have not always walked humbly with God, our God. Yet, when we look at the life of Christ through the lens of humility we can see how far short we fall of the way of Christ.

Despite all these failings, God has not given up on us. God has shown us the truth we need to know and the way we need to follow through the incarnation, God in human form, walking among us, as one of us. The Church, the Body of Christ, has so much potential. We don't walk in our own strength but in the strength of the one who created us and who first loved us even before we were created.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

When we learn walk in this way, we will have learnt to
'Give... to God the things that are God's'.

Amen. Amen. Amen.