

Second Sunday of the Epiphany - 14 January 2024

Message – Holistic care for ourselves and others

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, lighten our paths and guide us in your ways. **Amen.**

I imagine, I am not alone in liking the story of Samuel's first encounter with God. It has some comedy to it as well as some realism. Most of us do not expect to hear God's voice. We, too, would probably assume the voice came from anyone who was nearby but not from God.

We probably also hope we might say, with Samuel, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' Simultaneously, we probably really hope that God will not speak. We've seen what happened to the prophets, the disciples, and many early followers of the way and, if we are honest, we really don't want all of that, thank you!

Yet, we call ourselves followers of Christ. And, we know Christ's path, the revelation of the way we need to follow and the truth we need to know. None of us knows the future. And, so it is in accepting the gift of grace and embarking on following Christ's way, we do not know where the path will lead, or what God will ask of us.

Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael had no idea where the journey would lead them. They had a strong conviction, faith, that Christ was the only one worth following and, with that conviction and faith committed themselves to the journey, wherever it might lead. We follow their example.

In the case of Nathanael, we have no idea where it did lead. He is often identified with Bartholomew in the synoptic gospels. However, other than today's gospel reading, we know nothing about either of them. The identification does not occur until the ninth century and is primarily on the basis that Nathanael's name occurs after Philip's in the synoptic lists of the disciples.

Our calling may be to a seemingly quiet life. Yet, if we are faithful to God's calling, the ripples of our life may extend around the world without our ever knowing. Simple acts of love and kindness can have profound consequences. So can acts of neglect and not caring, where we could have acted to pass on God's love.

Reflecting on the way we are as the followers of the way is where Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians comes in. Evidence within the letter suggests this is not in fact his first letter to them but rather that this is a response to a letter or letters from them. It is perhaps frustrating that we don't have all of the letters exchanged between Paul and the Corinthians but on the other hand we need something for Biblical scholars to do!

The running theme through the first letter is the need for the unity that reflects the reality that we are the community of God, the temple of God, and the body of Christ. Behind all of this is the need to show love for one another, as Christ commanded us.

In this particular passage, Paul is using diatribe, a Socratic method of teaching, following a series of questions, whose

answers, he hopes, will lead us to see the error of our assumptions and conclusion. By now, some of you have realised that I am not entirely sold on many of Paul's arguments, and this is no exception. He has a valid point but the picture is more complicated than he paints.

To start with, sex outside of marriage, is certainly not the only harm that we can do to our bodies. Within this passage body might be better translated as person, which some commentators do to make the point. Paul is writing to and challenging a Hellenistic worldview.

Corinth was renowned as possibly the sexually immoral place in the Roman empire. It is believed that there were up to a thousand temple prostitutes, serving the temple to Aphrodite. In this profoundly permissive society, Paul is calling on the Corinthian Christians to live a different life. And, this may well have been the most striking way in which they could set themselves apart.

Yet, there are undoubtedly many other ways of sinning against ourselves. Suicide, self-harm, excessive drinking or eating, lack of self-care, there are many, many ways of harming ourselves in ways that are contrary to the fullness of life that Christ lived, died, and lives again to reveal to us.

Many of these may reflect in inner world in great turmoil, they affect the whole person mind, body, spirit, and as part of the community. It is somewhat unfortunate that St Paul spends so much time talking about sexual conduct as it seems to have blinded us to all of the other ways in which we may harm our person and the wholeness God offers.

Paul's underlying argument is that our whole person is holy and a temple of God, wherein dwells God's spirit. Our bodies belong to God, they are not in and of themselves sinful, but we can become subject to sin, or we can choose to be subject to Christ, the choice is ours.

In the case of the Corinthians, Paul is naming the most obvious way in which they are harming themselves and probably one another. Paul urges them, not just to 'shun', as our translation rather lamely puts it, but rather to 'flee' from sin. His wording has that great a sense of urgency.

So, today, what are the ways in which we are harming ourselves and harming one another. What are the ways in which we are failing to show the love that will identify us as followers of the way of Christ, that will fail to respect our whole person as a gift from God.

One might note that many of the ways of harming ourselves can go quite hidden, often until it is too late. For the health of our community, that is both our church and our wider community, we need to be prepared to talk about the ways in which we may be harming ourselves and one another. They are often rooted in issues that are beyond our easy control. At that level, one could argue they are not a sin. Yet the result is certainly not an honouring of God's temple.

We are told we are in a growing mental health crisis that affecting people in multiple ways. People are lonelier than ever before, there is a greater incidence of depression, and we are aware of groups that suicide is prevalent amongst. This got me looking at some of the statistics. There has

been a twenty percent increase in suicided rates over the last seventy years. That was far less than I expected and it may be accounted for by better investigation into the deaths of those who have died at their own hands. That gives me hope, perhaps we are managing to talk about these things more, even in the face of greater challenges to our mental health.

The condition I know most about is Major depression. 'It may be defined as a biochemical disorder, with a genetic component, and early experience influences, where somebody can't appreciate sunsets.' You will notice, that none of that is within the person's control. Yet, with the support of a community, talking therapies, and medication it is, for many people, possible to live life in all its fullness even with depression. But the response to it needs to be holistic, which involves all of us playing our part to hold each person in their own fragility and preciousness, as a child of God.

The same goes for many of the other harms we do to ourselves and to one another. The response has to be communal. It cannot be down to any one person. The needs are far greater than that. Our love and care can only grow through our taking time to get to know one another and that is not just checking in with those we already know.

I remind you, we need the courage to talk to those whom we don't know, who seem unfamiliar to us. As we do so, we will build connections and in so doing build up the body of Christ. Our calling is to be there for one another, to be there for friend and stranger, to be there for those we love and for those we struggle to love. Amen. Amen.