

SERMON 15 OCTOBER 2017

Last week, the Sydney Morning Herald had an article about the changing face of our suburbs, according to the last census. We read this kind of thing quite often, but the theme for this, more than focussing on changing cultural patterns was the decline in religious allegiance. Kuringai Council area was featured especially because this had been known as Bible belt and strongly Christian. No longer is that the case. It is not that other religions have taken over. There is more ethnic diversity, but the change was due to the far greater numbers who state no religious affiliation. The Bible belt is now in the south of Sydney.

It isn't really surprising, given what we know about the lifestyles of the many younger and not so young families around: the pressures on double income families with big mortgages who may be paying dearly to live in this lovely and sought after area. There are good schools nearby, easy enough transport into the city and out of it, parks and sports grounds, plenty of amenities. It has a safe feel to it. People's lives are busy. Speaking to people at Little Kickers, some of them run their own businesses or work from home, at least some of the time. Some of the families have au pairs to enable family life to have some stability, for children to be taken to various activities and to school. Most of these people have never had any connection to a church or other religious institution, or if they did, have left it behind a long time ago. It doesn't touch into their lives most of the time. They are doing fine without it, thank you, and what they hear about church in the media doesn't make them want to know any more.

So what we are doing here, this Sunday morning, is both counter-cultural and far removed from many people round about. Sitting in a wooden pew, singing out loud together, listening to stories that come from such a long time ago they no longer seem relevant? I don't think so! How this affects us is important, because, if it just makes us depressed or feel irrelevant, we are in danger of losing what we do have. The picture I have just painted is a well-known but also somewhat narrow view and, I think, begs a lot of questions. Now I haven't done a sociological survey or had lots of in depth discussions, but I suspect that most of the people around us share a concern for the world, for the very earth, air and water that is the basis for life; concern that we treat one another with respect – or fail to do so; concern for the ways in which we learn together in our increasingly diverse society. These are not

the preserve of the Church. Indeed many people out there may not think the Church has any useful contribution to make and may suspect that it does not.

There are some painful realities here, but they are not new ones. Jesus told a parable about the king inviting guests to the wedding feast he had prepared for his son. He sends out the invitations, but what happens? People are too busy to come, or can't be bothered. They are too busy getting on with their lives. Indeed, they even set upon the messengers who have invited them to the banquet and kill them. "Don't bother us!" seems to be the cry. The king, who has offered them great hospitality, is enraged and destroys these murderers and their city. Then he sends his servants out again to gather in anyone they could find, bad as well as good and the wedding hall is filled with people. The parable may be quite challenging, but we can make enough sense of it so far. But then comes the extraordinary scene where the king comes in to see the guests and notices one who is not dressed in wedding clothes. He is thrown out into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Really! What did Jesus mean by this? We can look at this in a couple of ways: maybe this guest never wanted to be there in the first place and has been dragged in unwillingly. There is, therefore, no place for him. Or perhaps, he has not cared enough to make any effort and is not the slightest bit grateful for the invitation, so he is not really joining in the celebrations.

This parable seems to tell us that there have always been those who are not interested, for whom this feast seems irrelevant to their lives and who just want to do things in their own way. "We are doing just fine thank you." Maybe they don't especially want to be in company with others who have been invited. Let's remember also the context, the strength of the opposition to Jesus, who is in Jerusalem teaching in the Temple. The gospel has never been accepted by everyone who has heard it. Maybe just as importantly, those who do hear it, who accept the invitation to be part of it, can also forget that the invitation was to a feast, a celebration of the son's wedding. How easy it is for the church to forget that! This is a feast that is freely offered, over and above the necessities of life in which we can get so bogged down.

I confess I have never been a great party person. I don't much like the noise and the throng of people, except when it is family or close friends on special occasions. It has never been part of my culture. But I also secretly envy those for whom this is so much more natural. I was supervising a Tongan minister on Wednesday, by Skype.

He said his house was full of people – he had lost count of how many – coming together from all over the place, including Tonga and New Zealand, for his daughter's 21st birthday on Friday. He had come out of his front door in the morning to find the place covered in bunches of flowers because his sister and another daughter had been at the flower market early on. They know how to celebrate! And they celebrate in church too. A week ago the Tongan community organised an evening of food, of course, and worship at the Centre for Ministry. The place was decorated with greenery, flowers and their beautiful mats. It looked really special.

Surely part of our counter-cultural awareness is remembering how much we are offered in our life of faith: how much generosity of all kinds we are surrounded with! If we had nothing in the way of material goods, we would still be called on to celebrate, because what we have been given is a gospel of hope and healing, of joy and abundance of the things that make up real life.

Paul writes of this so eloquently in his letter to his dear friends in the community at Philippi. These were people who had supported him in tough times and life was not easy for them. There were disagreements, and Paul urges them, and especially Euodia and Syntache, to be of one mind, which means having to listen to one another and not pursue their own agendas. Then he says to them “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” What image does that conjure up for you? Maybe something rather loud, hand waving, cheering. But the next words are “Let your gentleness be evident to all.” What Paul wants them to understand is not that they should always be ecstatic, but that through all the struggle and realities of life, of disagreements, of pain and struggle which Paul himself knew well and wrote about, everything is threaded through with the presence and peace of God which passes all understanding. This is the foundation of joy and the core of gentleness. This is the gospel. It makes me think of the lovely words in George Matheson's hymn: “O joy that sleekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee; I trace the rainbow through the rain and feel the promise is not vain, that morn shall tearless be.” This joy then, this rejoicing, is something to do with tracing rainbows; not chasing them, but opening one's eyes and seeing, however faintly, the arch of colour that hangs across even a dark sky, the shaft of sunlight scattering through the raindrops.

When you know what darkness and grief and loss is, you also discover that light is never extinguished by the dark. It is the darkness that is cast out by the light. I will

always remember a phone call, many years ago, from my older son Alasdair who had been very unwell with severe depression. He called to ask me what I thought one could say to someone who was suicidal. My heart was in my mouth as we spoke as I didn't know if he was talking about himself or not. In the end he answered his own question by saying "I just want her to know there are still rainbows."

True joy then is sensitive to others who are not in a place of rejoicing. True joy holds out the possibility of hope just by shedding a little light. True joy is fed, itself, by thinking about whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – anything excellent or praiseworthy, as Paul writes.

We are truly blessed by this wisdom that is deeply rooted in the story of our faith. We stand in a tradition of men and women who through the centuries have based their lives on following Christ and who have known their lives to be held, enriched and joyfully guided by God's grace. In whatever way it has happened for us – through our growing up, through the impact of family and friends, through what we have heard and seen and hungered for - the invitation to join in the celebration has been offered. It keeps on calling us back, and inviting us to participate in the feasting.

Joy is not a word that is used often these days, and is probably not much in the vocabulary of most people around us here in Lindfield, except when it comes to Christmas cards. Yes, there is often a conscious pursuit of happiness which, as we know, is different and more fleeting. So let us be aware of engaging in a counter-cultural activity of celebration and joy as we come together here on a Sunday morning and at any other time. Let us be aware that we can show this face to those around, with gentleness and peacefulness that is a gift we are offered also. Maybe very few people out there will want to come to the party but that doesn't mean that we should allow that to stop us responding with joyfulness and living with integrity as we follow the example of Christ, God-with-us, yesterday, today and tomorrow, the hope for the world.