

SERMON 29 OCTOBER 2017

It has been a tough few weeks. The lectionary has given us parables about what happens when people resist or refuse God's invitation to be part of what God is doing, in the vineyard of the kingdom or at the feast God offers. It has had us standing alongside Jesus as he meets the hostility of the authorities, the Pharisees, Sadducees and Herodians. We have listened as they tried to trap him, knowing that they wanted rid of him. Jesus has come very near the end of his faithful journey and we were left with challenging messages about the cost of discipleship and what it means to try to live in the ways of God's kingdom. Like Matthew's community, we have been asked to think about what all this means for our lives. This has not been a time of hearing warm fuzzy messages. This week, the lectionary has left out one of the 4 challenges Jesus faced and has moved us on to the final question Jesus is asked: "What is the greatest commandment?". This may not seem like a trap but it is. All the commandments were held to be equal. It was deemed wrong to single out any particular one. Jesus answers by stating the first commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." But he links it inseparably to the second: "Love your neighbour as yourself". And then he states that everything hangs on these two – all the Law and the prophets.

Then this is followed by lines that seem strange at first, when Jesus turns the tables and asks the Pharisees a question: "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" It seems a strange question because the answer has been known throughout Jewish history: "The son of David". But now Jesus asks them what is almost like a riddle: "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'?" "If David calls him 'Lord', how can he be his son?". No-one could say a word in reply. There is a lot going on here. This is both a political and a theological exchange. It links back to the coin that had Caesar's image on it, to the emperor who was "lord", if you like, the political ruler. David had been the anointed king, appointed by God and the political leader of the people. But God is Lord. Jesus, the Christ, is the Messiah, which means the anointed one. His power and authority will be shown to be above any secular or political ruler, even as he stands in the line of David. Matthew, in his gospel, has been at pains to emphasize this from the very beginning. Jesus, the son of David, has come to initiate the kingdom of heaven as he lives out for his followers the kingdom's ways, and calls them to follow. All this is

something new that they are being shown. It is God's purpose being made real for them. How are they to understand this?

Let's go back a bit in today's reading and the question about the greatest commandment. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (it is Mark who adds 'and all your strength'), and your neighbour as yourself". It is important to remember that we are getting near the end of the journey that takes Jesus to the cross. This is what the living, the loving and the dying, is all about. Everything else hangs from these. Maybe the challenges of last few weeks' readings have taken some of the softness, the comfort, even of the warm fuzzies of the gospel away, but the core remains God's love that is given to us - love that can withstand pain, suffering and darkness. Love that does not give up but that stays the course. Love that, fundamentally is a call to life. Love that stands up to wrong and injustice and stands with the oppressed and the struggling. Love that understands that unless we know that God loves us, we can't love God back, nor can we love our neighbour or ourselves. It starts and ends in God, who is love, and is held in God's eternity.

Here we are, today and now, in this place. We are but a tiny part of a story that reaches back through time across millennia, and, in our time, across our vastly diverse world. We know how flawed we are, how we get it wrong at times, and right at times. We know we don't understand everything, or even very much. But we are still woven into the story that is God's story with us and with all people. We are really no different from all those who have gone before us through the centuries. People have always known this journey of faith is one where sometimes there is just a holding on in the darkness, hoping we don't get too lost, and at other times a rejoicing in celebration as God's grace and goodness is made clear. People have always had times when they have felt unequal to the task and have found that that is what faith is about – putting a foot forwards and reaching out for God's guidance, not just sitting waiting for certainty. We have been hearing about Moses and all that he had to deal with as he led the struggling people from captivity, through long, long years in the wilderness, right to the verge of the Promised Land. We have heard his story from babyhood to death at the age of 120, and we know that he never got to set foot in this Promised Land.

Wednesday is All Saints Day – really a much more important occasion than Hallowe'en that there is so much fuss about these days. At least, as people have commented, we can avoid trick or treaters by going to hear about Luther alongside our neighbours at Holy Family. All Saints Day is not just important but a special opportunity to remember those who have gone before us on this journey of faith. It is good to take time to honour those we love still who have lived faithful lives through all their own ups and downs. It is good to honour those we may never have known but whose stories have made an impact on us. There are those who may be officially titled “saint” and so many more who are part of the goodly company of saints in whose steps we follow. This building itself, I know, holds so many memories of people and of times of significance. They are still a part of this place as we add our times of love and worship to what has gone before. There are memories of very different times from those we are in now. How can it be otherwise? Nothing stays the same. If it does, it stagnates, and God's kingdom is certainly not about stagnation.

This is all about the dynamic of love and life that is the heart of things, the greatest commandments. As we think about how we are part of the story of creating this kingdom on earth, of doing God's will on earth, we cannot separate what we do in relation to one another in the human family from how we treat the very earth and its life. I think there is a powerful metaphor in this. We are entirely dependent on Planet Earth, though we seem to think that if we pour in enough chemicals and fertilizers we can do what we want with it and it will all be fine, even though our water supplies become contaminated and our soil stripped bare of the vast complexity of life forms that are part of a healthy balance. Loving one another involves respecting one another. Loving the earth involves respecting it too.

I have been reading a big book that is partly depressing but ultimately inspirational. It was reviewed in the Sydney Morning Herald a few weeks ago and I ordered it. It is called “The Cry of the Reed Warbler”, by Charles Massy who is a third generation farmer in the Monaro. He is both a farmer and a scientist, a lover of literature and nature. At heart, it is a deeply spiritual book because it is about agricultural practices that are regenerative. It tells so many stories about men and women who were often

forced to find new ways of approaching farming because their land was degraded, salinated, affected by drought or fire or soil erosion, over-ploughed and chemical dependent, or a mixture of these. It is inspirational because it tells of how the land restores itself when people look and listen and treat it with humility. There is a lot of scientific explanation about what goes on at a deep level in all of this and how crops and animals show extraordinary benefits as the ecosystems are encouraged to regenerate and recover what was thought to be lost. As I get near the end of the book, Massy is pointing to something much bigger in this picture: that right within the DNA and genetics of micro-organisms, of plants and animals, just as with humans, there is a dynamic that moves to restore and re-create. Given half a chance, this will bring about adaptation and newness.

There is, to me, something deeply significant about this. It tells us that there is an imperative about renewal and re-creation. It is the imperative of God's purpose of love. We get caught up in our own ways and then forget that around us and all kinds of other things that are happening. The Spirit is always at work. The book reminds me that so much depends on how we look at life and the journey we are on. While there are times when we may struggle to find a way through, when it feels as if there is so much around us that feels degraded or dying, as in a drought stricken landscape, there is also something else there which tells us that our understanding may be limited and incomplete, and that God's purpose will always make its way forwards.

The whole dynamic of the gospel is about how God's way of love offers healing as it addresses human need, human pain and injustice and, indeed, the very fundamental things of life – food and shelter and safety. It is like this because love is dynamic: it empowers and respects, it accompanies and supports. This love is at the very heart of our understanding of God. It is the love in which we are held by God and, unless we are open to receiving that, we are not able to respond lovingly. It is no wonder that this is the first and greatest commandment and that the second is inseparable from it. Why should this be a commandment when it seems so necessary for life? Maybe it is because God understands our human weakness better than we do ourselves because, as we well know, our love always struggles against our desire for control and power. In the example of the response of the earth

and its organisms when regenerative practices are encouraged, there is there no holding back. There can be no feeling of unworthiness or self-judgement such as we humans impose on ourselves as our thought processes impose our own self-centred mindsets. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (yes, all your mind). And love your neighbour as yourself”. We can set our minds to love.

This journey of life and faith is based on a commandment to love God, our neighbour and ourselves. It involves us all. In this global village we now inhabit, we have a very different understanding of who our neighbours are than people did even a couple of generations ago. The commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves holds ever changing challenges. Whoever we are, we are all in this together, sharing our fragile planet, and part of a much bigger story that goes far back into time, when things were so very different. We are writing our part of the story here in Lindfield. Of course we face change and challenge, but let’s go back to where we began this morning. We have travelled with Moses through all his ups and downs, his questioning and his persistence in faith, even to where, apparently, he never reached his goal. But he had journeyed with God all along. We have seen how Jesus never wavered from what he knew his journey of faith required of him, as opposition around him grew. We have seen how he held out to people God’s redemptive purpose of love, the life-force that would prove stronger than anything the worldly powers of his day could throw at him.

We are on a journey of faith that always calls us on, no matter where we are. Such is the story of all the faithful throughout time. It is a privilege to be able to play our part in our place and our time.