

Sermon “Why Bother With Church? Is it Worth it?” Sept. 13, 2009

Today has been called across the whole Anglican Church in Australia “Back to Church Sunday – Come as you are” with the aim of encouraging people to either come to church for the first time or to reconnect with the Church after a long time or to attend a little more regularly than in the past.

Why bother? Why come to church anyway? There’s so much else to do. Life is so busy and relentless. We don’t have the time or the energy and it’s so hard to fit in around work and relaxation time and with our children and their multitude of sporting and social events, especially on a Sunday.

Why bother to come to church anyway? Is it relevant to my life? What will I get out of it? And what will it demand of me in return? These are all sensible and valid questions. Questions that we all ask at some time or other. I certainly do especially when I am on holiday. But I always come back to the reality that I need the empowerment and wisdom and sense of community and purpose I receive for the whole experience of worship. Sometimes the experience is really great and inspirational, often it may be fairly pedestrian and a bit lack lustre. Still there is always something of re-empowerment, of reconnecting with God each week in a deeper way, of experiencing a word of wisdom or inspiration that keeps one connected and wanting to be an active part of the Church here and everywhere. This occurs despite some personal bad experiences or reports of the many failures and stupidities and outright appalling behaviour of some of its people and its leaders.

As I listen to the news each night, I often find myself shaking my head in disbelief or frustration or even anger at some of the things people do to others in anger, violence or abuse; or force on others because of their rigid beliefs or philosophic views; or say about others, in judgment or callous disregard; or inflict upon themselves because of their own stupidity or lack of self worth.

Such news items as gang bashings and alcohol and drug fuelled violence; of corporate greed and irresponsibility; of fundamentalist denial of others’ rights or values; of appalling terrorist violence against whole systems and peoples whom the perpetrators believe are somehow in the wrong; and the all too common immature, snide, debasing remarks made about others by politicians and sporting personalities and entertainment figures.

I am struck by the lack of wisdom and integrity, by the uninformed bigotry, and by the lack of personal concern and responsibility for others’ safety and well being that floods across our TV screens and News Reports.

All these lacks of wisdom and integrity and displays of ignorance and violence are each things that I believe seek to be countered by an active and participatory involvement in a caring, compassionate and inclusive community of faith where we seek the wisdom of God for our living and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to be and do what is right and good for us and for others. Not according to rigid legalisms and fundamentalisms but according to Christ’s loving compassion and demand for personal accountability and a discerning caring ethic for living and being.

Two of our readings this morning come from what is called the Wisdom Literature of the Bible – the Old testament book of Proverbs (*Proverbs 1:1-5, 32-33*) and the New Testament Letter of James (*James 2:14-18, 24,26*). Some people just think the Bible is made up of dry old books of rules and regulations for life that make you a stunted, judgemental wowser of a person. And indeed there are some such dry old books of laws. But there is a really deep awareness within most of the Bible and especially in Jesus’ teaching that rules, ever divinely authorised and given rules, are never enough. For so many of the deep ethical and moral dilemmas of life we need much more than rules – we need at least two other divine and motivating forces in our lives – wisdom and compassion.

Aristotle the great Greek moralist once said when dealing with the issue of telling the truth, that it is not enough simply to tell somebody the bald truth. But, rather, that truth is best which is told to the right person (ie. not spreading gossip) and at the right time (not in power abuse

or in anger) and for the right reasons (ie not to be vindictive or judgemental). And of course you can't come up with a rule for that. You have to use discernment and wisdom to know the right time and place and reason and person.

And so wisdom and discernment are two of the recognised and most important gifts of the Holy Spirit that God can give us and they are oh so lacking in much of our institutional governance and in the behaviour of our leaders and sports people, and of course our teenagers and young adults in general in their social and personal behaviour.

At University when I did my degree in Chemical Engineering, we had to do in our final year an optional choice subject that we were free to choose from a large list. I chose to do the subject of "Engineering and Ethics" as I felt this may be helpful. Indeed it was. It was challenging and confronting and explored the reality that keeping legal and strictly obeying all the rules and regulations did not always mean that you were acting rightly, justly or ethically. This was a great learning experience for me and I think began the development of a wisdom and a spiritual discernment that I so needed to live life better, even well, as a person.

As a teenager and Uni student I was not a church goer at all. Then as a graduate Engineer I felt a deep and insistent call and compulsion to explore my spirituality and the supreme reality we call God. So I began going to church. Now it was not all inspiration and exciting relevance but there was this deep recognition that to maintain some degree of wisdom and integrity and ethical justice in life I needed the church to help me make contact with God and God's wisdom and guiding for my life.

Schools and colleges and universities are acknowledged places of learning, of gaining knowledge and of data exchange but they are not always places that impart, with this knowledge, the most necessary internal practices of wisdom and discernment that keep society and community and personal life in proper balance and working order.

The book of Proverbs and the little letter of James declare truly that wisdom is more important than all wealth and fame and power in the world. How often have wealth and power been used to oppress, destroy and disempower others? How often has fame and wealth led people into destructive lifestyles and delusional self importance at the expense of others?

Wealth and Power and Fame and Knowledge without the necessary complimentary gifts of Wisdom and Integrity are very dangerous and potentially destructive things.

Why do I come to church? Why bother? Firstly to keep confronting myself with the reality that I am not all that is important in the world. Secondly, to recognise that I need to seek and develop the gifts of wisdom and integrity so that I can make better life choices and decisions for myself and others. Thirdly, to be in interactive community with people hopefully striving for the same sort of things. Finally, to give honour and nurture to my dependence on God as my Creator and life-giver and as my empowerer and guiding wisdom and purpose for my life.

Our world is destroying itself through lack of wisdom and integrity and compassionate spiritual awareness and this is what I believe Christ and the Holy Spirit and the Church can give me and hopefully all of you as well.