

5th August 2018

Thought for the day

I do enjoy reading an email blog I receive each day. It posts some interesting news from around the world that relates to the church, and a Bible passage each day with some reflection. But I confess that the bits I enjoy most are the 'Thought for the Day', the 'Quote for the Day' and the 'Joke for the Day.' I'm sorry if that disappoints you. It probably diminishes me in your eyes.

Today's 'Thought for the Day' was: "Some of us are so old we can remember going through a whole day without taking pictures of anything." If you don't get that thought, then you obviously don't have a Facebook account inundated with people's trite photos of what they are eating for dinner, or of their pets hiding in a pram. Mind you, I love seeing photos of people's travels overseas. They are visiting places I will probably never see for myself.

And today's 'Quote for the Day' was from the great missionary to India, Lesslie Newbigin: "Nostalgia for the past and fear for the future are equally out of place for the Christian." I had long been a fan of Newbigin before I visited Chennai, but in Chennai we were staying in the guest house alongside the cathedral in which Newbigin became bishop when the Church of South India (CSI) was formed. I was a little nostalgic. The CSI is a fantastic story of church leaders catching the priority for unity in the church that we are reading about in Ephesians. It was an inspiration for the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia, and other such unions around the world.

I recall being somewhat overwhelmed by the myriad plaques affixed up every column and every inch of wall space. I wondered if the church was in danger of drowning under its preoccupation with the past. The bishop spoke more than once of how "a church that does not know its history has no future." I don't think he meant that we are bound to the past. That is different to learning from our past.

Indeed knowing our past is an antidote to fear for our future. We are part of the continuing story of God's persistent love and grace, even through times of severe persecution. Perhaps our fear for the future is more of a reflection of the absence of such struggle such that we forget who we are, whose we are, and why we are.

And I know you are hanging out for the 'Joke of the Day', which always comes at the end of the post.

My therapist told me to write letters to the people I hate and then burn them. I did that. Now I don't know what to do with the letters.

. . . I'll let you make of that what you will.

12th August 2018

Contradictions

It's certainly been an interesting week in my shoes. How about yours? I hope your week has had some intriguing dimensions ... otherwise life gets to be boring and predictable.

'Interesting' is my favourite word in the English language. But another word has rivalled it this week. It is the word 'contradictions'. And some of those contradictions have left me feeling sad for the church.

In one conversation I had this week the person told me he had read the Assembly report on marriage. He was telling me what a great report it was ... that it was very thorough ... excellent address of the subject from every angle, particularly the biblical material. In fact he was wondering why he didn't agree with it. And there was the contradiction. He effectively said he didn't like what he read, as thorough and compelling as it was, so he simply rejected it, while claiming to be championing a 'biblical' position.

And there were other contradictions relating to other matters in other contexts scattered through the week. It has all gone to me offering you this marvellous prayer from Leunig's collection of prayers.

*God bless our contradictions,
those parts of us which seem out of character.
Let us be boldly and gladly out of character.*

*Let us be creatures of paradox and variety:
creatures of contrast; of light and shade; creatures of faith.
God be our constant. Let us step out of character into the unknown,
to struggle and love and do what we will.
Amen*

Let us accept our contradictions as opportunities for learning and growth.

19th August 2018

Exploring the gospel – an ongoing task

The events of the past few weeks have highlighted for us some of the different approaches to the Bible. I am currently reading a new book by Geoff Thompson titled *A Genuinely Theological Church*. It has come at a good time for a number of reasons. It has alerted me to a couple of things that are going on in this disjunction.

Over recent weeks I have seen us more clearly recognise where a certain approach to biblical interpretation has pushed us at St. Andrew's, pushing us to better understand the dimensions of the Gospel that are of highest importance. Feeling rejection of who we are has nudged us a little further into an appreciation of what rejection feels like for people who walk in 'other' shoes – of those who are different, who live on the margins of society because who they are has not been accepted. We have recognised the primacy of loving God and loving one another, even if they don't think the same as ourselves. I celebrate that. I am thankful for that.

Geoff's book talks quite a bit about a concept I am still getting my head around. He talks about the role 'social imaginative' plays in the theological task. The concept is common to some other disciplines but I haven't given it thought in terms of the theological task before.

The eminent theologian Karl Barth once said:

"The good news of Jesus Christ is not a dead commodity handed over to us so that we can 'have' it. Beware of this capitalistic conception of Christianity in any form, old or new! The gospel must ever again be explored and sought and inquired into."

The longer I have been in ministry the more the tough, hard shell that I had formed around my understandings by the time I began my theological studies has been softened and slowly permeated. Understanding such fixed formulations of belief that can be passed on to another as another manifestation of capitalism is helpful. As Barth put it, the gospel must always remain a subject to explored, and sought and inquired into. To do otherwise is either sloth or arrogance. I find I am absolutely certain about this, not more and more, but less and less. The mystery that is God, and life in God, as a disciple in the contemporary world, continues to capture my imagination and my soul. And I don't regret that change at all.

25th August 2018

Revolution of the heart

Sue and I visited the Immigration Museum last Monday. It was a great experience. A visit is well worth anybody's time. It was disappointing that it didn't dwell much on the impact the first wave of immigration had on our indigenous brothers and sisters, although it was not totally ignored. But as we made our way through the subsequent unfolding history we became aware of some issues recurring. It became apparent that there is a recurring theme in our history of discrimination against Chinese immigrants. More broadly there was a recurring theme of distrust of non-white immigration – ranging from the era of the White Australia policy through to recent government policy (by both sides of the house) concerning those who have fled violence or natural catastrophe seeking asylum amongst us.

Observing recurring themes like that gives pause to ponder why that might be. So often the response comes back to the common denominator of fear ... specifically fear of those who are different. Yet all the while, throughout this history, the great contribution that immigrants from other cultures have made to our nation is apparent on

so many fronts. Yet the fear remains. And 119 children remain impoverished and fearful for their lives on the tiny island of Nauru.

Unfortunately the outworking of that fear so often is that it seeks a scapegoat. We have heard both Malcolm Turnbull and Peter Dutton in recent months scapegoat the Sudanese community. It is an easy target. It is a very small community. They are obviously different. They have taken no cognizance of the trauma these people have fled, how hard it must be for them to adjust to a very different social context, or the work being done among these troubled young people to help them find their place in Australia. Rather they have pandered to the base instincts of tribalism in the pursuit of political advancement. But to what end? Where does that take Australia?

We have been reminded as we have read our way through the letter to the Ephesians over recent weeks that all humanity is one family, having a common source of life in God through Christ. And we have heard the “therefore” of embracing all our brothers and sisters across the globe, no matter how alike or different they may be, as common members of that family. Christians are called to a higher way. We are called to the way of love and of “bearing with one another.”

Dorothy Day once said: “The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution that has to start with each one of us.” I believe that to be a challenge facing our nation – to open ourselves to a revolution of the heart starting with ourselves.

Let us let our “hearts be changed, renewed.” May we have a heart for God, and a heart for our neighbours – those like us, and those who might be very different from us.
