

3rd February 2019

We are the church

"I believe churches are meant for praising God. But so are 2am car rides, showers, coffee shops, the gym, conversations with friends, strangers, etc. Don't let a building confine your faith because we will never change the world by just going to church, we need to be the church."

When I read that anonymous statement this week, it struck me as the perfect attitude with which to transition from the slower pace of January into the new year's round of activities. We are a diverse group of people. We are involved in lots of different activities in Sunbury and beyond. Collectively 'we', the people who are St. Andrew's Uniting Church Sunbury, are involved in all manner of activities and locations, service clubs, sport groups, workplaces, family networks, etc. Each of them is by definition where our church is. Each of them is where God should be praised.

This Sunday we will read the story of a time at the very beginning of his public ministry when Jesus spoke in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth. It turned out to be a tough gig. Even among the religious folks in town, the radical good news of the Gospel of God's saving work had been corrupted and constrained to make it very comfortable and homely to the local townspeople. But Jesus spoke words of truth. It made those religious people very uncomfortable. But he had the courage to pursue truth, and to reach out to those who weren't there that morning with good news of love and compassion and acceptance by God.

May we continue to live out that radical Gospel of love and acceptance and make it known in the various contexts of our lives. Welcome to 2019!

10th February 2019

Help us be welcoming

Maybe it's because the year is young. Maybe it's because I am conscious that new people have joined our church over the past couple of years. Maybe it's because people have asked questions about our church, a sussing out, to see if there might be a place for them among us. Maybe it's because such things have arisen in conversations over recent days. Maybe it's just because I am very conscious about the need for a church to be truly open to new members, that its decision-making bodies are accessible to new members, that the opportunity for service and to make a contribution be available to new members, that we need to be embracing of new ideas and suggestions about doing things differently that come from new members out of their experience and observations from other places.

For whatever reason, this prayer, written by a colleague in the NSW/ACT Synod, found a special place in my consciousness this week.

Help Us Be Welcoming

*God,
We learn to welcome people in your example through Jesus,
In the way he welcomed people.
Help us welcome others,
Just as we have been welcomed by you.
Whether they are outsiders,
Whether they are outcasts,
Whether they are sick,
Whether they are healthy,
Whether they are poor,
Whether they are wealthy.
Help us be kind and patient.
Help us to be compassionate and forgiving.
Help us to be caring and understanding.
Help us to value them as people.*



*Help us to give them our time and attention.
Help us to let them have space to be themselves,
As we love them as our neighbours,
Just as we are loved by you.
We welcome your help in this.
Amen. Jon Humphries*

Let's make that a prayer for our church.

17th February 2019

Jesus calls us to be better

I won't comment on political matters from a partisan viewpoint, but the Gospel does call us to engage political issues from a place of faith, and sometimes to do it fearlessly.

It's been a hyped-up first week of parliament for the year. Fault lines have been exposed on many fronts. But the fault lines on show this week are not the old ones of conservative vs. liberal, left vs. right. As a friend put it: "the fault lines show up in the legitimacy we grant or erode from institutions designed to mediate the plurality inherent in the old fault lines." People from the conservative side of politics (albeit 'independents') have teamed up with those from the progressive side to deliver a more responsibly compassionate provision of health care for very sick people while maintaining the security of our borders. Amen to that.

It was sad, if not so shameful, to see journalists on no less than the Sky Network, pick apart the plethora of deceitful and disingenuous lies the Deputy PM was sprouting, the same lines other members of Government have been giving voice to. This line of argument goes beyond subjective opinion and was shown to be blatantly untrue, exposing a fault line in the moral fabric of our Government. We are a people committed to truth and must call out such falsehoods.

People for whom Australia is responsible have henceforth been treated so badly that twelve have already died in detention and more are critically ill. We can, and must, do better. Perhaps we revere passion more highly than compassion. Certainly the Gospel calls us to live the life of faith passionately. But that is a call to live with passionate compassion. It is costing the Australian economy huge sums of money to treat these people so appallingly while turning a blind eye to the vastly larger number of people who are living illegally in this country, but who came by plane. There is no disputing that it is all about the optics.

The millions of dollars we are spending on such penal abuse of people desperately seeking asylum from violent systems could be much better directed towards 'closing the gap' with our indigenous brothers and sisters, or giving a fairer allocation of education funding to our public schools, or providing desperately needed services to the elderly and people with disabilities, or raising our overseas aid budget from the cellar, or ...

And I haven't even mentioned the shenanigans going on around Pauline Hanson and the continuing circus of people who congregate around her, or the deluge of advertisements on our television from a man who has treated his workers so abysmally. I do long for some sanity and moral character to return to our system of government.

There, I've "vented my spleen" ... to borrow a clue from *Pointless* (on Channel 10) earlier this week. Jesus calls us to something better than what is being delivered.

I hesitate to mention this, but it's not long now until the real game commences once again. I know AFLW and AFLX are going on presently. But I'm a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to sport and I am looking forward to the traditional AFL season proper. Yes, I will be barracking hard for my team, as I know others of you will be barracking hard for your team. The question arises whether that is where our passion ends, with our team, or whether our primary love is for the game itself. We have seen what has happened to our love for cricket when that trust and respect for the game itself got overridden by the need to win-at-all-costs. Long-standing rules of the game were breached and the game itself suffered consequently.

A radio commentator during the week was lamenting the present state of federal politics: "It's as though we're all now barracking for our own team and we don't care about the main game anymore." All week we have heard of one dubious activity after another by our elected representative. This led one columnist to write: "The worst of this is that the behaviour alienates people from their politics even further, and the wider that representation gap becomes, the harder it is for governments to do anything that needs doing."

There is a tendency for us to do the same in church-land. We do sometimes get to barracking so hard for our particular club (or church) that we lose our broader understanding of being part of the universal church of Jesus Christ. And there are consequences for the whole church, and for the world, when we do that.

This Wednesday night we are invited to join in the World Day of Prayer service. This Service has been prepared by women from Christ's Church in Slovenia. We are invited into a broader engagement with the universal body of Christ.

So, yes, I will still be barracking hard for my own team – both the Bombers and the Uniting Church that I love. And it was a joy to join other team members in our workout session at yesterday's working bee. But I will be participating in a way that is a celebration of the bigger picture of greatest importance. I remember travelling home from games on the train and the whole carriage, with supporters of the rival clubs, sharing their joy of the game, and recounting the various contributions of the respective teams in wonderful camaraderie. If that can happen over a game of footy then it should be possible even more so in the life of the church.

