

3rd June 2018

Kissing frogs!

I quite enjoy hearing frogs croaking in their ponds and creeks as I walk around. Nevertheless I found the Thought for the Day in a daily blog I get each day a little disconcerting yesterday. It read: "You've got to kiss a lot of frogs before you find the handsome prince. But he probably isn't going to be interested in some frog-kisser." It might surprise you but I'm not exactly in the habit of kissing frogs myself, nor do I advocate anyone else to do the same. But it holds an interesting lesson.

A friend and colleague is currently attending the Christ At The Centre conference in Bethlehem. In a message home yesterday she quoted one of the speakers:

"According to our Lord, the Biblical test-case for the love of God is love of neighbour. And the test-case for love of neighbour is love of enemy." (Pastor Brian Zahnd)

As its name suggests, that conference is being held on the border between Israel and Palestine, at the centre of tensions between Jews and Arabs. The persecuted Christian community in that space sees itself exercising an important role. As another young speaker expressed that understanding of their ministry:

"My role as a Christian is to be a witness to the work of Christ in this land. Just as Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so was I. This is the greatest thing for me, let alone preaching in this land! My role is to win hearts and should for Christ in our land, which is suffering from the lack of Christians and believers.... As the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish said: "Upon this land there is that which deserves life!" (Adham Alaraj)



It's when the idea of true godly love gets translated down into kissing frogs, or loving enemies, that we most truly witness to the love of God made real in the world. At St. Andrew's we have begun a dialogue with Uniting (our church's community services agency) about whether we might be able to make an even better contribution to our Sunbury community by collaborating together. That means we might need to kiss some distasteful frogs in the name of Jesus Christ.

But how exciting might that prove?!? Who knows, we might end up discovering that we are the handsome prince.

10th June 2018

Be careful what you pray for

This week our worship will ponder the thought contained in the song title "Be careful what you pray for, you just might get it." We will read how the people of Israel begged Samuel to give them a king. "Everyone else has got one. It must be right." Haven't we heard that line often as our children have grown up. That was really strong for Sue and I when our children's peers were all getting fancy flip mobile phones. We resisted giving them a phone at all for some time. And when we did it wasn't a flip phone. Wow! We were not popular parents! How our daughter described that phone is not for delicate ears.

"All the other kids have got flip phones."

"All of them? Are you sure?"

"Well, maybe not all of them."

"So you won't be the only kids at school who don't have a flip phone?"

"Well. No. Not exactly."

Argument resolved! But I suspect we adults are just as bad at using that line to justify many of the choices we make in life. Don't we justify the choice of car we buy, or the holiday we go on, or the things we populate our houses with, using the same argument? "Everyone else does it, it must be okay." But do we discern many of those choices in prayer, asking God was the faithful thing for us to do is?

As a church we are prone to the same rationale. “That’s what every other church does, so it must be the way we should do it.” And we don’t discern as a community what God calls us to contribute to the kingdom of God in our patch.

We do it politically. The people around us vote a certain way, so we conclude it must be the way we should vote. And we don’t engage the question critically and prayerfully from a faithful discernment of God’s guidance.

That is why we sought to saturate our Dreaming Day in prayer as we sought to listen to God, and then sought God’s guidance within the community context. Following the Dreaming Day the Church Council engaged in a prayerful process of discerning a vision that emerged from those conversations and prayers. That vision will be offered back to you this morning. You are asked to hold it in prayer throughout the week and we will invite conversation and reflection next Sunday.

We have been careful in what we have prayed for. We have prayed for guidance and insight, and responsive hearts. What that means for us as we move forward we wait to find out.

17th June 2018

Let God shape your faith

I hope many of us have read the very thoughtful column in the current *Crosslight* written by Geoff Thompson (Co-ordinator of Studies – Systematic Theology, at Pilgrim College). In case some of us didn’t get to some things Geoff said later in that article, let me repeat them:

“I would argue that a theological education is not about developing a theological ‘position’ at all. Nothing so impoverishes the contribution of theology to the church when it is presented in those terms or when it is expected to function, or is caricatured, in that way.

Rather, it is about shaping a theological imagination. It involves learning to see and experience God, the world, Jesus, salvation, mission, church and neighbours through an ongoing critical but constructive engagement with the tension-filled biblical material, an immersion in the ebb and flow of the history of Christian doctrine, and a ruthlessly honest familiarity with Christianity’s history and its diverse practices.”

That is dense stuff. Maybe, like me, you wished Geoff had paused to draw breath in the midst of those sentences. But it should get us excited. Perhaps, like me, you grew up in a church environment that sought to define my faith according to pre-determined perceptions of how a Christian should live, and the language we should use to describe our faith. I wish some of those people who asked me if I was ‘saved’ would engage the faith in the imaginative and critical manner Geoff speaks of in these paragraphs.

I always felt that the church, and its more vocal leaders, were trying to squeeze me into the shaped box that they imagined, even though they hadn’t allowed their imagination to grapple with, and be inspired by, the grand mystery that is God and God’s ways of being in the world.

That is not to say that we should be anything less than disciples whose lives are shaped by the Bible. To the contrary, we need to understand exactly what that Bible is revealing to us. For centuries upon centuries this faith story continues to unfold and reveal ever clearer insight into the nature of God and what it means for us to be God’s people in this world. To understand that learning requires something more than picking isolated texts out of contexts we have not explored, reading them without questioning the cultural conditioning that influenced the choice of that particular set of words.

‘Doing theology’ is a much more exciting task than deciding what shaped box, and what size box, we will require other people to fit into. It is a constant ongoing joyful journey of being shaped by where God is to be found in that tradition, and where God is to be found in our contemporary world, perhaps even where God is to be found in strangers and enemies – those who disagree with us.

I thank God for those who have disagreed with me over the years. Some I have had strong arguments with. They have helped me to a far richer appreciation of the faith, and understanding of what it is to be a disciple of Jesus. I invite you to engage in this interesting challenge of developing a ‘theological imagination’ and letting that shape our discipleship.

It's about this point that I really get to wondering if going on a couple of week's break is really worth it. The pressure to ensure this week's commitments are completed adequately, anticipating what I need to have organised to cover my absence, and the need to have prepared for events that will happen in my first week back, so often means I start my time of leave in a state of tiredness.

This particular time seems to be increasingly pressured because of a range of circumstances either side of that leave. But finding space to step back from these things, to spend some quality time together as a couple and with our family, and some sheer time out vegging in a place where no one knows us, are important necessities in our lives. It's about self-care. And in the long game, that's about being a better disciple over the years of service.

Some of us are better at attending to this important dimension of life than others. Some of us need to learn to set such time aside in our lives. We do no one any favours if we wear ourselves out in perpetual work. Others in our society would do well to learn the value of foregoing some self-indulgence and discovering the joy and character-building merit of getting involved in loving our neighbours and contributing to the social capital of our community. This was one issue that arose in my group at this week's *Code of Ethics* refresher program that all ministers are mandated to participate in regularly.

But exercising self-care is more than taking appropriate time-out. It includes the need to be enmeshed in a local community of faith. That goes beyond attending the act of public worship for an hour once a week. It involves being connected together as an organism of interdependence, equally *giving life to* one another and *drawing life from* one another. Our culture disposes us to increasing independence and individualisation. We must resist this for it is the antithesis of the way the Gospel of Jesus calls us to live as an integrated organism, the Body of Christ.

In this vein I offer you these comments of M. Scott Peck, from his book *The Different Drum*:

"So we are called to wholeness and simultaneously to recognise our incompleteness; called to power and to acknowledge our weakness; called to both individuation and interdependence.

Thus the problem – indeed, the total failure – of the 'ethic' of rugged individualism is that it runs with only one side of this paradox, incorporates only one half of our humanity. It recognises that we are called to individuation, power and wholeness, but it denies entirely the other part of the human story: that we can never fully get there and that we are, of necessity in our uniqueness, weak and imperfect creatures who need each other."

As indicated above, I am on two weeks annual leave until Sunday 8th July. The following week I will be a member of the 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church, meeting here in Melbourne. I implore you to be voting for each and every member of this Assembly and its leadership, and the large team of people who will facilitate this gathering. And I would encourage you to be part of the Opening Worship of the Assembly, including the installation of Dr. Deidre Palmer as President of the Uniting Church for the next triennium. That worship will take place in St. Michael's Uniting Church in the CBD, commencing at 7pm on Sunday 8th July.
