

2nd September 2018

Welcome to Spring

Welcome to Spring. I've been hanging out for it to arrive. These past few weeks have been very cold. But there is something special that comes about at the beginning of Spring. The weather is still cold, but new life is starting to show itself in all sort of places – our apricot tree among them. It's as though it has decided that it refuses to hibernate any longer and has decided that although it still feels like Winter, it will send out its new growth anyway. It's as though it is refusing to be taken captive by the surrounding climate and has determined to be what it is meant to be, a fruit-bearing tree.

It was as I mused this 'miracle' in nature that I read this statement in Geoff Thompson's latest book, *A Genuinely Theological Church*. He wrote: "the church does not live by successfully conforming to the space the powers of the day make available to it".

There have been times when the church has been given a very large space to live. For much of our lives we have lived in such a space. But that time has passed. We now live in a world where "the space the powers of the day make available to the church" is quickly diminishing. Some people will lament that demise. But reflection on that period suggests that the church has not prospered. In fact, the church in the Western world has declined significantly.

The challenge for the church is to break out of that space, to refuse to conform to what the world around us would consign us to. The time has come to be like the apricot tree and to resolutely, perhaps riskily, break out to be who we are made, and called, to be.

As the *Basis of Union* puts it: The "church is able to live and endure through the changes of history because its Lord comes, addresses and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work."

We cannot predict what form the church will take as it allows itself to be 'addressed' and 'dealt with' by Jesus Christ. But it is likely to be something more useable to him than whatever we would be if we merely conformed to the space and form the world around us would seek to fit us into.

We have a vocation to remain open to being addressed by and dealt with by the one we call Lord.

So welcome to Spring, as we celebrate the Season of Creation in our worship throughout September. May God call us out into something more useable to him, and bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

9th September 2018

Who am I?

"Who am I?" is a question we have all contemplated throughout our lives.

Sometimes we have played it as a guessing game, asking questions in an endeavour to identify the identity of the person whose name has been pinned to our back, only ever getting a Yes or a No response. Or perhaps we have participated in a quiz in which a series of clues are offered until a participant guesses the identity correctly. Perhaps that game has had additional benefits when we have enjoyed a Fantale toffee in the process.

Adolescence is by definition that period of transition from childhood into adulthood. The question "Who am I?" is central to this progression. As children our identity is largely provided by our family and its values. In adolescence those values we have inherited are questioned and evaluated, compared with other values we are becoming aware of through our interactions beyond our family. It is an integral question when partnering with another. It's as if we each place our suitcases overflowing with the values we have inherited from our respective family-of-origin, and from other sources, and decide upon the values that will inform and inhabit our shared life together.

That process of questioning who we are continues throughout life. For some that question assumes an existential urgency as they struggle with issues of self-worth, perhaps struggling all-too-often with a reason to go on living. Certainly this question informs every choice we make, shaping our identity. "Who am I?" is for some a very confusing question whose answer is complicated by unfortunate life experiences, by abuse or by mental illness.

In Psalm 8 the writer ponders this question. At first it leads the writer to ponder the vastness of the universe and to marvel at how vast the world the Creator has made is. The writer was perhaps tending to feel lost in that vastness, and wonder if the Creator of all that immensity could possibly be aware of 'little ole me'.

But then the writer gives voice to the most wonderful insight of any. And perhaps, along with the writer, we also are overcome with the wonder that God is truly 'mindful' of we human beings and that God cares for us. But specs of insignificance in such a vast universe yet we have been made just a little lower than God and been crowned with glory and honour. What's more, we have been entrusted with an incredibly important role, or serving and caring for all that vastness that God has made.

Surely we might join the chorus of exclamation sung by the Psalmist:

"O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

16th September 2018 **Pay it forward**

I was looking around at some stuff about the sky, given that this Sunday is Sky Sunday in our Season of Creation. I found this interesting saying:

*Even
After
All this time
The Sun never says to the Earth,
"You owe me."*

*Look
What happens
With a love like that,
It lights the whole sky.*

— Hafiz

I have no idea who Hafiz is. But I sense he is a wise man (presuming it is a man). The sun just keeps on giving and never demands the favour be repaid. We are so much part of a culture that is very ready to demand our rights, and to expect a favour to be repaid. (Is this perhaps the story that lies behind the *au pair* controversy in Canberra?) Don't we feel that pressure when someone invites us to a meal? We feel an expectation to invite them to a meal at our place. But what if, having experienced the beauty of that hospitality, that we instead invited someone else who doesn't normally get invited anywhere to our place for a meal?

A movie that had a huge impact on me a number of years ago is *Pay It Forward*. If you haven't seen it the plot is essentially a kid coming up with a classroom project that encourages people not to pay a favour back to someone who has done you a good turn, but to pay it forward – to someone else. The concept is of a snowball gathering more and more mass as it continues to move forward, as more and more people are impacted with an act of kindness, or a helping hand, or a listening ear.

Certainly the sun never demands its energy to be repaid. It just goes on giving off ... powering the galaxy. That is a marvellous illustration of how the love of God is, and the mercy of God is, and the forgiveness of God is, and the transforming power of God is ... it just goes on giving out without ever being depleted ... because God is love ... and as every parent understands true love is never expended and used up. It is the ultimate renewal energy and is capable of powering the world. Here is another example of how the sky announces God's presence and glory to us. Read Psalm 19.

23rd September 2018

Bruce and Hazel

On Monday we learned that Bruce Prewer, a significant national figure through his publications of prayers and poems, early in his life decided that he hated religion. Thankfully he heard the call of God to faith, and then again to ministry. Through that ministry he blessed countless people. And we count ourselves privileged to have known this holy man as a person, and brother in Christ.

Then this week I read how a man who had spent most of his life as an atheist heard the call of God at 85. I speak of the former governor-general and Labour stalwart Bill Hayden. I speak of Mr. Hayden — a former opposition leader, republican and humanist — who was baptised at St. Mary's Church in Ipswich earlier this month.

He was often cited as one of Australia's most prominent atheists. However he had a change of heart several months ago which led him to baptism. Clearly it's never too late. The priest who baptised him commented "I think Bill's been spending a lot of time in the service of people in government and in the general community, and he took a while to discover there's a context for all of that."

Mr. Hayden described his pivotal moment as a hospital visit to see Sister Angela Mary Doyle, a prominent Brisbane nun whom he had admired for years, and woke the next morning sensing that he had been in the presence of a holy woman.

This week we have farewelled two such holy people that it has been our privilege to know and observe their life of witness and service. They should continue to be inspirations for us as we continue our pilgrimage through life.

30th September 2018

The church and politics

It's Grand Final weekend. One thing that becomes apparent more in Grand Final Week than throughout the rest of the year is how, for all our allegiances to different clubs, we all come together around 'the game'. On Grand Final Day it doesn't matter which club we support, we all are interested in the game because it is the game we love, even more than our particular team. So I will wear my Bombers membership scarf even as I watch the Magpies and the Eagles compete for this season's highest accolade.

That should also be the case when it comes to being part of Christ's Church. That is not to say that which church we give our allegiance to is not important. I am utterly convinced that the Uniting Church is a vital part of Christ's Church, and has a vital contribution to make to our community. But at the end of the day the greater importance is our allegiance and love for the movement of God that is the Church catholic (the global worldwide church), which flows from a love for the common denominator who is Jesus.

I extend that line of thinking to say that the same applies to politics. There is a line of thinking that says church and politics should never mix. I disagree with that in the strongest terms. We are all part of the *body politik* and are therefore part of the politics of that body.

Martha Bellhorn said:

"People often say, with pride, 'I'm not interested in politics'. They might as well say, 'I'm not interested in my standard of living, my health, my job, my rights, my freedoms, my future or any future ...'. If we mean to keep any control over our world and our lives, we must be interested in politics."

The person of faith who is caught up in the movement of God's kingdom in the world, is by definition called to be involved in the politics — the well-being — of our world. We might naturally have an inclination to a particular 'brand' of politics, but the ultimate game is the betterment of the whole world. And in that there is a higher allegiance to the politics of Jesus — to the *common-wealth* of God's creation. And that means we must extend our political thinking beyond what is best for me, for my country, for my western part of the world. We are called to a grand vision of a renewed heaven and a renewed earth in the image of the Creator who made it good.

Go Bombers! (for next season).