

EXPLORING A NEW WAY OF LIVING

Sermon by the Revd Clive H Norton on 22ND June 2008,
5th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

at St.Peter's Anglican Church, Cremorne, NSW

Readings: Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:8-11, 18-20; Romans 6:1-11;
Gospel according to Matthew 10:24-39

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Prayer: *Holy Spirit, present in creation, in the life of Jesus, and in all living things, give us that inner power and strength to begin to live more closely with you day by day. AMEN.*

Look with me please at the second reading, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" To begin to understand what Paul meant we have to probe below the surface. If in general conversation nowadays we mention "Baptism" probably most people immediately think of the 'churchy bit' when some water is splashed on the head of a baby, who cries, before the party to celebrate the birth of a baby! I've noticed that often many guests don't get to the 'churchy bit' and only turn up for the party! There are, of course, many times when the Baptism of babies is a sincere and meaningful action by parents, and it can point to serious reflection. After the christening of his baby brother, little Johnny sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, "That priest said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys!"

Paul in today's reading was drawing on the profound experience he had when he was baptized. He was in his early 20's and it was around the year 34 AD. As a jealous young Pharisee he had been on a crusade to scare and arrest the followers of Jesus whom he regarded as traitors to their religion. He had played some part in the lynching and killing of Stephen, one of the seven deacons whose job it was to distribute food to destitute widows among the non-Jews who had become Christians. Near Damascus, Saul had a life changing experience. He felt an intense light that threw him to the ground and heard a voice, "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." (Acts of the Apostles 9:1-19) Saul was fourteen years or more younger than Jesus, and he probably had never met Jesus during his earthly life. But from that moment Saul's thinking about God was re-shaped totally. He learnt that we do not serve God, if in our religious zeal, we try to impose our beliefs, religious laws and punishments on others. We encounter God in other people and God suffers if we do them harm.

Saul was baptized in the same way as others who wanted to become followers of Jesus from Nazareth, who had been denounced by the Jewish religious authorities and executed by the Roman colonizers. Saul, like parents with their children and others in their households, went down into the water and was submerged. Paul uses a powerful simile: in baptism he was "buried" in the water. It was a sacramental outward action with an inner meaning: stating their intention to set aside destructive ways of living and to escape from the contagion of sin. It was a pledge to leave behind the sort of attitudes that led to the death of Jesus. Their coming up out of the water symbolized their desire to live within the love of God and allow the Jesus way of living to soak into their lives. "Following Christ means exploration of a new way of living."¹

It was not until eight years after Saul's baptism, that the group following "the Way of Jesus" were first called "Christians" in Antioch in the year 42 AD. (Acts 11:22) And it was

during the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul to Cyprus and [what is now] the southern part of Turkey from 45 to 49 AD, that Saul changed from using his Jewish name and started using his Greek name Paul instead.

Paul wrote lots of letters over his years of travel, often to answer questions or offer advice; but in the one to Christians in Rome written in the winter of 57-58 AD, he expounded what he believed about Jesus' "Way" in a much more ordered style. His experience of being baptized is central: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:4 & 11)

This to our modern ears sounds like typical religious talk. It takes a bit of thinking to unravel and apply. Let's try! I've noticed that today we are hearing more often the word "attitude". Sometimes it seems to be loaded with new meanings having to do with a person's way of projecting themselves and causing a reaction in others. St Paul counsels that we should "consider ourselves". How do we think of ourselves? What are the implicit and sometimes explicit "attitudes" we project?

Jesus as recorded in the Gospel reading for today says, "A disciple [follower, learner] is not above the master ... if they have called the teacher... Beelzebul (that is, an agent of the evil one, lord of the flies or lord of filth) how much more will they malign those of his household. ... So have no fear of them. ... Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

Why are we Christians so fearful, so scared, so quiet when we ought to speak up? The media, TV, radio, newspapers and others delight in reporting the extremists because conflicts create interest and income for the paper or program. And squeaky wheels get attention. But Christians who faithfully follow the Way of Jesus, those who do not thump the microphone and yell "the Bible says" or "the Church teaches" and do not have the resources to make extravaganzas like Mel Gibson's misleading "The Passion of Christ" (2004), do not often now get accurate and fair media reporting.

Thoughtful, prayerful Christians in the mainstream churches especially the Anglican Church, are not being heard because we have adopted the attitude that 'we can't do much to change things' – resignation, passivity, nostalgia for the past, feeling awkward because some may think us 'odd'. These sort of attitudes seem to swamp us. Such attitudes are the opposite of that lived out by Jesus and Paul.

Jesus lived within a storm and why should it be different for followers of his Way? Not everyone is going to welcome the changes that Jesus' teaching represents. Those who benefit from the injustices and inequalities of the status quo then or now, frequently respond violently to Jesus' new ways of ordering life.

I, like all of us here I suspect, have often been too shy, embarrassed or too lazy to take the time and care to speak with someone, when opportunities have arisen, about what I believe and why. In some situations it is actually more difficult for an ordained minister because many people have many fixed ideas of what a minister will or has to say! But, as many of us have been singing with Bob Dylan since 1963, "The times they are a-changin'". The problem is that most leaders in Christian churches and people in the pews simplistically reacted against what was stirring four decades ago. They did not heed the encouragement given in the last book of the Bible: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." (Revelation 3:22)

One good spin off from recent years when literalism and fundamentalism have heavily influenced institutional religions and economic theories, is that we are seeing a desire for something more. There are more people seeking a different spiritual path, not satisfied with churches offering pat answers or info-tainment.

More people are wanting to have deeper conversations on a one-to-one basis or in groups, with an individual, or chaplain or facilitator. They need you and me - us – to be willing to speak as one human being to another as we journey on through life. It will be a different style of “being church”. As followers of Christ we have to learn to speak sensitively and act boldly. It is never too late to learn more. Our ultimate security in life is found in the love of God rather than in passing popularity.

127 years ago, a young Scottish Presbyterian minister, George Matheson, wrote the hymn we are going to sing shortly. He relates that it was the fruit of severe mental suffering known only to himself. From what he wrote it seems he had been wrestling with the clash between what he had learnt as a young Christian and the theology he had studied before being Ordained, and the new ways of thinking flowing from the 18th century Enlightenment and the 19th century scientific advances.

He tells elsewhere that he had come to the point that he believed nothing, neither God nor immortality. “I tendered my resignation to the Presbytery, but to their honour they would not accept it...They said I was a young man and would change. I have changed!” Of this hymn written in 1881, George Matheson said, “It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression rather of having it dictated to me by some inward voice than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes.” In, now outdated old fashioned English, it expresses the truth most central to my life and I hope to yours. From that Centre we can do our part to change the church and the world to express the Way of Christ.

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee:
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Light that followest all my way ...
I yield my flickering torch to thee:
my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee:
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee:
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.²

Enquiries, comments and criticisms are invited; also requests for additional copies of sermon scripts or permission to quote / reproduce.

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¹ Revd Dr Keith Rowe, UCA Minister, Auckland NZ, in With Love to the World: A daily Bible reading guide based on the ecumenical Revised Common Lectionary, Vol 12 No 3; see commentaries for 18 & 19/6/08. wlwddbrg@bigpond.com

² Together in Song: Australian Hymn Book II, (publ. 1999) - Hymn 602 words by George Matheson, 1842-1906, tune St Margaret by Albert Lister Peace (1844-1912), and A Companion to Together in Song: Commentary on each item & Biographical Notes, by Wesley Milgate and D'Arcy Wood (publ.2000)