

A Story of Courage and Faith

Jeremiah 20: 7-13, Psalm 69: 7-19, Romans 6: 1-11, Matthew 10: 24-39

As a parish we are currently in the middle of a lot of preparations for the ***Reconnecting with God*** outreach program that we will be sharing together in August and September. The leadership team are organising the advertising, the printing and distribution of invitational pamphlets, the catering, table leaders and support people, and carefully going through the written material to ensure that what is presented is relevant to our culture and place. These are all important parts of the preparations for such an event, but what is most important is the preparation within each of our hearts as we reflect on our faith in Christ and what it is we want to share with others.

Why have you chosen to put your faith in the Triune God?

What brought you to church in the first place and what made you want to stay?

What is it that you find in the Christian faith that you could not find elsewhere?

These are really important questions for us to reflect upon in preparation for sharing the gospel with others. Each of us will have different answers to those questions – what brought one to church will be different to what brought another. The way Jesus has worked in *my* life will be different to the way Jesus has worked in *yours*. That is what makes our community so rich, each has a unique story to share, each one of us has a unique gift to give.

We can teach theology and church practice, we can talk about various aspects of faith and quote Scripture until the cows come home, but unless what we are saying is grounded in our hearts and lives, our struggles and our joys, then what we are sharing will be mere words.

Sharing the gospel with others is a requirement of discipleship. There is no getting around it. If we have chosen to live a life of faith in Christ then both our words and actions should bear witness to Christ. It is an absolute privilege to live a life of thanksgiving and love, a life filled with God's mercy and grace, to seek justice and peace in the world, and I doubt that anyone here would disagree. But let's be honest, it can also be scary at times, because not everyone will respond to us and our message in a positive way.

Our readings today express the pain and anguish involved in sharing a message others do not want to hear. The Prophet Jeremiah for example, laments the fact

that no one wants to hear what he has to say and even threatens to remain silent because of it. But he says *the word of God burns like fire in his bones and he cannot remain silent.*

In Psalm 69 the anguish of rejection is also painfully expressed: *When I humbled my soul with fasting they insulted me for doing so. When I made sackcloth my clothing I became a byword to them. I am the subject of gossip for those who sit at the gate and the drunkards make songs about me.*

And in Matthew's gospel Jesus warns: *I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

These are hard words from the Prince of Peace, but the reality is that living the Christian life will, at times, cause varying degrees of conflict in our relationships with others, and unfortunately, the greatest conflict is often experienced with those closest to us. Not always, but for many this has been the case.

Some of you here today are the only Christian in your family, some have experienced terrible pain in family relationships because of your faith in Christ, some have suffered ridicule, or at the very least a good ribbing, from work colleagues or neighbours.

It is hard, it is painful, but God is with us, and so we should not adopt an "us against the world" attitude or take on a mantle of victimhood.

We must however, expect that when we make choices about how to live our lives based upon our faith in Christ, then others will respond to those choices. Some will want to know more and be open to the gospel, some will be indifferent, others will be dismissive, and some will be openly hostile. What hurts the most, of course, is when those we care about most cannot seem to accept the healing, life-giving love of Christ.

Discipleship can be a very hard road at times. Each of us has our own burden of pain, disappointment and suffering that we carry with us on our faith journey. The Christian life is not one that promises great victories and triumph everyday, nor does it promise hearts and flowers in our relationships with others, or prosperity and success in the world. However it does promise grace, redemption and hope.

To live the Christian life is to walk in the way of the cross, *to be baptised into the suffering and death of Christ* as Paul says to the Roman church; to accept

that our pain, suffering and struggle is real, is a part of the human condition, but is also embraced and gathered up by God on the cross.

To live the Christian life is to walk in the way of the cross, but it is also to walk in the light of the resurrection; that *newness of life* that Paul talks about that comes with the healing and redeeming love of God.

This is what I have found in Christ that I have not found anywhere else, the promise of life through death that is the heart of the Easter mystery. For me this is the deepest truth of life, this is what gives me hope and courage, this is what brings true healing, peace, meaning and joy into my life.

As a child I experienced a lot of sickness in my life and as a result spent long periods in hospital. The loneliness and fear this brought was more difficult to cope with than the physical pain of my afflictions.

As an adult I have had to find healing for deep anger. I have experienced the terrible grief of the loss of loved ones. I live with what at times is a crippling self doubt, and I have searched long and hard for a sense of my own identity, my true self.

These have been some of the pains and struggles of my life.

Alongside all this of course there have been experiences of great joy, dreams pursued and realised, unexpected gifts and encouragement, deeply treasured relationships, a loving family, discoveries of my strengths and talents, passions and creativity.

For me the Christian faith is one that offers a vision of being fully human – one in which every aspect of my humanity is acknowledged and embraced – my gifts, my strengths, my weaknesses, my hopes and dreams, my failures and disappointments, my pain and deepest wounds, my doubts, fears and ideals, my individuality and my relationships with others. All of this, everything that makes me who I am, is encompassed and transformed by the Easter mystery.

In Christ I find God, in Christ I find myself, in Christ I find my neighbour. Christ is the greatest love of my life. This is the story I can share with others.

Is sharing the gospel with others frightening at times? Yes.

Does the thought of inviting someone to share in the outreach program send our anxiety levels through the roof? For many of us, yes.

Are we concerned that others may ask questions of us and the Christian faith that we can't answer? Most likely.

But does our faith in God's goodness, our passion for Christ and our love for others outweigh our fear? I hope so, I pray so.

I do not know how people will respond when I invite them to share in our ***Reconnecting with God*** program, I don't know what sorts of concerns or questions may be asked by those who come along.

But I do know that God's faithfulness to us exceeds the furthest bounds of our imaginations.

I know the kingdom of God is far greater than our little part of it.

I know that the movement and power of the Spirit will take our breath away if only we open our hearts and step out in faith and courage.

So as we go into this week let us do so with hearts bursting with joy in the Lord, ready to share the love of Christ through our actions, through our conversations with others and by being a healing and life-giving presence in our relationships with others.

The Lord be with you.