**Highfield Road Uniting Church**

**Pentecost 24 - 3.11.2024**

**Psalm 146:(1-10); Mark 12:28-34**

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***Early Word***

We come together in grave times. War rages on and as we speak, the lives of countless innocents are extinguished in an instant as the powerful seek to dominate and control. And at any moment the conflicts may escalate into all-out war drawing in more and more nations.

There is fear and distrust on all sides and the notion of truth has become a tool for deception, disruption is seen as the way to gain advantage, and goodness is devoured by the lust for power.

And, in two days’ time, there will be an election that may profoundly alter the course of history whilst half our population is preoccupied with a horse race. And it’s a double irony that Tuesday will also be the day we used to celebrate as Guy Fawkes Day, and today all the world’s institutions are again undermined by the explosive power of unbridled personal ambition.

Ah, my friends, it is indeed a fearful time, and I don’t know about you, but it leaves me prone to despondency. Where to find hope?

But one way, we are reminded, is to look back. To look back at our past when we have survived and notice how we have seemingly been borne on the wings of angels. Lifted up, when all seemed hopeless. Carried when all seemed lost.

And here many of you will be familiar with the poem entitled “Footsteps” in which, on looking back, it is realized that we have been carried by unseen arms.

It’s times like this when we need to look back and realize the arms that have carried us, often unseen individuals and communities, people great and small in our lives, who have left an indelible impression or been of indescribable assistance, as well as those who have simply made life possible in more ways than one. The people and communities that have been “the arms of God” for us.

And by looking back, realize that we were carried even though we may not know it, and thus find hope at times like this when hope seems a distant mirage, and the present is shrouded in darkness.

So, at this time in the church’s year celebrated as ‘All Saints Day’ that is what we do. We look back in time to remember and give thanks for those who have carried us through difficult times, those who by their personality have made life that much easier and more enjoyable for us, those who have inspired us, and those indeed who have given us life itself in the first place.

I invite you now to remember and give thanks in private prayer, and if you so wish, come forward and light a candle placing it in the sand tray before us as a pathway to hope.

And while we do that Graeme will play softly and then finally a verse of a well-known hymn tune and we will all join to **sing four verses of the evocative old hymn “For all the Saints.”** Remembering that God’s blessing is for all who would accept it, not just for those who make a confession about it.

***Reflection***

The first thing that we should notice about the passage read for us from Mark is that it is a Scribe who asks Jesus the question, “Which commandment is first of all.” The Scribes were a religious sect in Judaism at the time that prided itself on knowing and interpreting the law, every jot and tittle of it, even adding new laws to amplify the old ones. Their teaching elevated adherence to the ‘law’ to the top measure of righteousness. It was assumed that strict adherence would earn God’s favour.

Unfortunately, the religious laws and practices they taught became so restrictive as to stifle faithfulness, goodness and compassion. The law became a measure of self-justification that lost sight of the grace of God and dependence upon that alone. Jesus was often very critical of the Scribes for these reasons.

One of the scribes sought to ask Jesus a question that seems patronizing at best, demeaning at worst, so obvious is the answer. And we need to appreciate the passage as literature here, not just biblical text.

The scribe is one of those annoying characters in literature and life who knows everything and can’t resist telling you what you already know. When Jesus gives a textbook answer the scribe *patronizes* him by saying, *“you got it right!”*

But in the end the scribe goes on to sprout his brilliance by adding that, what we know as the great commandments are *“more important than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* And that allowed Jesus to affirm him saying*, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”*

And there’s the literary gazump. In his last words the scribe has spoken a truth that he himself might have overlooked, an “own gaol” in soccer terms, we might say, that is: Loving God and loving your neighbour as you would love yourself is more important than the law and all that is done to express the tenets of the law in the practice of religion.

*The message for us today is just as clear. We are not to elevate the rules, the sayings, the belief systems and practices of religion, even the scriptures themselves above actually loving God and others as we would ourselves.*

And the inclusion of this story in the gospel by the writer is yet another literary opportunity to emphasize the first commandments which are repeated so many times in both the Old and New Testaments.

*“You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbour as you would yourself.”*

But what does it mean to love God? What do we think of when we use the word God? And who is my neighbour?

Gail and I have recently toured the Baltic States in northern Europe. Despite all that has happened in the region politically over the centuries, the three states are now independent and are still strongly attuned to the Christian tradition.

In every city there is a multiplicity of churches, Catholic, Lutheran and Orthodox, all well maintained and displaying great devotion, at least in the past, by the quality of their architecture, and the art and sculpture within them, as a mark of their dedication and faithfulness. But it was how *God* was depicted that struck me.

I’m sure you will be familiar with frescoes, mosaics, murals and statues showing God as an aged male with a white beard, usually high up in the building, albeit with benevolent intent.

This is a legacy of a time during the so called ‘enlightenment’ when religious art came to be expressed in humanistic terms as a reaction to the ‘other worldliness’ of medieval imagery. The age of reason wanted everything discernible to the human mind.

These images of God made in the image of humankind tend to influence our imagining, but I hope we can nowadays get beyond projecting onto God any human or earthly image or an idea that God is somehow ‘up there’ pulling the strings of fortune.

Rather we need to reimagine God not as visible in any way, but as Spirit within which we and everything else dwells, and within which everything happens, the good, the bad, and the indifferent.

I believe we need to understand God as Spirit, with a capital S, in more than religious ways but as one that holds all that is, all that we are together, the glue that holds us and the whole cosmos together *in the power that we call love,* calling things together to create newness from destruction and disintegration, every moment of every day, an infinite agent of renewal and regeneration.

The invitation is to know the word Spirit to encompass those things we experience as real and true but cannot encapsulate or adequately describe in words, such as truth, beauty, the arts and music, and of course, love and the gift of life itself.

This way of thinking about God calls us to use our imagination, but not about physical things or images, but rather, about the realm of the Spirit, which to us is mystery. As such, we are called to let go *knowing and defining* something in human earthly words and terms but imagining something that we cannot ultimately proscribe or capture in our minds but is nevertheless real and efficacious in our lives.

This may sound far-fetched and idealistic at first but I’m sure you recognize that I’m talking about faith or trust here, trust in that which is beyond our comprehension but within our ability to experience and make happen if we choose to do so. It could be called “living in the certainty of Hope!”

Sounds simple. But it needs a new way of being. It means not knowing everything but being prepared to live in the realm of mystery and possibility that is not yet. Living in trust of that which is good and true even though it is yet to come, as though it is already with us.

This may sound like age old sayings about faith, but it asks us to know ourselves in a different way. Not as the fount of all knowledge or paragons of virtue and achievement, but as dependent and needy children of God, conscious of our shortcomings and limitations, and in need of the grace of God.

In short, our self-identity, not our achievements or righteousness will be what defines us. We won’t be known by what we do as much as by *who we are* as children of a loving God, who cares for us and calls us forth to better things, no matter how things are in the moment.

This rather turns our understanding of the commandments on its head. Our loving of God will not be by dint of our own righteousness or prowess or even our strength of will, but by a response to and acceptance of the love of God who first loved us.

Our ability to love ourselves will not be by the force of our personality and resolve, but by a sense that we are needy and indeed loved by God, expressed in life itself in the first place and the love of others flowing from that – a continual sense of gratefulness.

Our love of neighbour will not be because of our magnanimity or generosity but by a new understanding of our neighbour’s ‘loveliness.’

We will try to appreciate ‘our neighbour,’ not just as those who need our help and understanding, but as people who are loved by God, however different they are to us or even antagonistic, even our enemies, as Jesus said.

We will not love out of pity or, worse still, duty, but because the neighbour is one of God’s creatures the same as us. Our love will not only be based on need, either theirs, or, day I say it, ours. It will be based on *who they are as individuals and communities graced by God.*

Do you see what I’m driving at. It’s a bit of a revolution in one way but in another, not at all new. It’s what the Christian life has been from the beginning, I believe. The entire thrust of the ministry and teaching of Jesus is what I call “other consciousness.”

Every story, every parable, every encounter was about seeing the value of the other person, especially those who were generally looked down upon, the outcast, the sinner and socially disadvantaged, of course the one set upon by thieves, but also the tax collector, the prisoner and the prostitute, not to mention the impetuous, the headstrong, the self-righteous, the angry and the proud.

From day one to the end, Jesus was for ‘the other’, both as persons and as communities. It was this political leaning that so enraged and challenged the power and wealth seeking classes oof his time that got Jesus crucified. It was so against the law!

It is his life of ‘self-giving for the other’ that faithful obedience to the truth of a self-giving Father God, and the Spirit of love for ‘the other’ that imbues and sustains creation that we see in Jesus, and has led humankind to sometimes call him ‘saviour of the world’

Let us be part of that life and love of ‘the other’ that we know in Jesus Christ Our Lord. AMEN.

 Alastair Pritchard