

## LAST SUNDAY IN THE PARISH

I've thought a lot about what to share with you all this morning. In the end, I asked myself, what would I like to leave with you? What parting words would I like you to hold on to as Jay and I leave for Canberra, and you all continue on in your life and ministry in this place.

After giving it much thought and prayer, I find the readings set for today pretty much say it all.

I remember as a young and enthusiastic Christian, pestering God with the question, "Lord, what do you want me to do with my life? Having read many inspiring stories about Christians with dynamic ministries, I hoped there would be something special God wanted me to do. I know my unchurched parents lived in trepidation as I approached my HSC, hoping I wouldn't take off to China or some other remote place, as a missionary. They could see the burning zeal in my heart and it made them nervous....

They were most relieved, I think, when I accepted a scholarship to train as a teacher. Little did they know that my teenage zeal saw the education system as a ripe mission field, ready and waiting for another passionate Christian teacher to share the Gospel with anyone who would listen. And I'd have to say, there was some wonderful fruit for the Gospel during those years.

As I've matured, I still passionately want to do the will of God, but have realised that it has more to do with who I am than what I do.

God seems far more interested in us 'being' than in us 'doing', though the concepts are not mutually exclusive. Who we are certainly gives birth to what we do.

The Old Testament lesson from Micah gives us a brilliant answer to the question, "Lord, what is your will my life?" God says, through the prophet, "the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God." (GNB)

There is no injunction in those words to do anything in particular. They simply speak of our conduct in our everyday lives - wherever it is God has placed us. We are simply to walk in humble fellowship with God, exemplifying his heart in the way we live - by doing what is right and just and by living in love. That's not to say there won't be a specific call on our lives to do something in

particular - but certainly our primary calling is that of Micah 6:8, through fellowship with Christ.

Today's psalm says much the same thing: that essentially, those who please God are those who walk with him and live godly lives.

I'll come to the New Testament reading in a minute, but do you remember what Gospel reading was about? The Beatitudes!

**3** "Blessed are the poor in spirit..."

**4** "Blessed are those who mourn..."

**5** "Blessed are the meek..."

**6** "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, **7** "Blessed are the merciful... **8** the pure in heart... **9** the peacemakers... **10** those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake... and so on.

This passage has been called "the manifesto of the King". In essence, it sets out the conduct expected of citizens of the kingdom.

Commentator Myron Augsburger says this:

"As one of many messages by Jesus, (the Beatitudes) present important moral or ethical teachings. It is not a message on salvation as is John 3, neither is it on the work of the Holy Spirit as in John 16. Rather, it is a message on a lifestyle for the "new creation"—those who are born of the Spirit. It outlines the kind of life which is expected of the "new community." However, it is not a legalistic formula, but rather this message calls the members of the kingdom to faith in every area of life."

Christianity is not a set of rules, is it? Our faith centres around an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. *A personal friendship* with him.

When we come to him in faith, he cleanses and forgives us, and fills us with himself, empowering us by the Holy Spirit. That's Christianity 101.

The most freeing thing about being a Christian, is that we have *already* fulfilled the law of God, because Christ did, and Christ lives in us. When God looks at us, he sees the perfection of Jesus, not our failings, and we are completely accepted by him.

Yet we are still called to do battle with the world, the flesh and the devil - as we were exhorted at our baptism - to conquer our sin, and to bring it into

submission to Jesus. And we're called to be as Christ to the world around us, and to bring his love to bear upon it.

But we do this in *partnership* with Jesus. We do this in the power of the Holy Spirit within us. I wonder though, if at times we forget, and soldier on on our own? I know I do at times. And then I realise that I'm not connecting to the power source. It's always there of course - I haven't disconnected - but it's like there's a switch that's slipped into the 'off' position, and I sometimes charge ahead on my own.

On Friday at 7.00 am, the phone rang. Normally, I am not awake at 7.00 am - but for some reason I'd woken at 6.00 that morning. I thought that it might be the evacuation centre, so I answered. It was someone in need:

"So sorry to ring you this early - but I really need help."

So I listened. It was someone on their way to Narooma from Gippsland to take up a job in Dalmeny. (It turned out to be at the IRT) But she'd had a couple of months without work, awaiting this job with the same company, and had gone through all her savings. She had absolutely no money. IRT was providing accommodation at Horizons, but she needed food until she got her first paycheck. I said I was sure we could help her out, but then I realised she also had no idea how far it was from Narooma to Dalmeny, so I offered to pick her up from the bus stop and take her to her accommodation, hoping we could sort something out for her.

Now I must confess, I was operating from what I 'should' do, rather than from the heart of God. These last few weeks have been very tense for all of us, and for me, also very full indeed, as I've been involved with the evacuation centre, giving out grants to bushfire victims, as well as connecting with people in the parish and getting things ready to leave for Mandy. Friday's programme was chockers! - and now here was something else to do, and I could see it taking a while. I always try and keep in mind Matthew 25:40, where Jesus says, '**Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.**' so I was willing to help, but my heart wasn't in it. It was an effort. I think the power switch had slid into to 'off' position

Yet God is so good. His wellspring of power is always there within us, and Friday morning, when I was feeling spent, he actually took the initiative. It was a small thing, but it made a huge difference.

As I put down the phone - and sighed - God spoke to me. (nothing unusual there - God is always speaking) But it was the specific nature of what he said that touched me and just changed my heart. He gave me a mental picture - it just popped into my mind. Someone was asking Jesus for help. Jesus smiling and responding lovingly, said, "Yes, I'll help you! Let me introduce you to my servant Carol. She'll take care of you," and he brought the person over to me.

It's hard to describe the difference that made.

There was a chorus, we sang back in the day, that said, "To get a touch from the Lord is so real..." That's all it was. A touch from Jesus. The power was suddenly there. The sense of obligation melted away, and I found myself serving Jesus and this person with my whole heart.

Turns out she's a new Christian. And when I asked why she'd rung the Anglican Church, she said her pastor had said when she left, that if she found she really needed help, to turn to the local church. So she googled it and rang us. Good thing Anglican starts with an "A", huh?

As we consciously walk with God, seeking to do his will, the power of the Holy Spirit is always there.

I said I'd come back to the New Testament reading. 1 Cor 1:18 says, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

The main thrust of 1 Corinthians is all about how to live as a Christian in an increasingly secular world - something we would resonate with. Paul, after excursions into the subjects of disunity in the church, and how the cross transcends the wisdom of the Jews and Greeks, returns to the cross being the power of God for those who are being saved.

My small encounter yesterday was an experience of that power.

Both for Paul's readers and for us, to live Christlike lives is often contrary to the ways of the world. Paul reminds us that what the world considers 'foolishness' - Christ's death on the cross - actually unleashes the power of God for our salvation and our sanctification.

What I'd like to leave with you this morning are two simple thoughts:

1. **To be like Jesus**, is not complicated. It doesn't mean we must struggle to follow a set of rules. Rather it means seeking a closer and more intimate relationship with Jesus, seeking his face, and spending time with his people. Then the character that God looks for will come as naturally as apples to an apple tree.
2. **To follow Jesus**, is also not complicated. It means simply offering ourselves to him, to serve him and serve our world as he directs, in the power of his Holy Spirit. The opportunities will flow as we open ourselves to him and say 'yes' to him.

As a church, if we can prioritise these two things, we will become increasingly like him, and he will direct our paths.

Let's pray.