

Lent 4A/Mothering Sunday - 22.03.20

Sermon by Rev'd Julie Craig-Leaves

This is what I wrote at the top of my page. It's shocking and sobering. I'm not sure it's easier to know that, throughout the Anglican Church of Australia, Bishops and Archbishops are telling their parish clergy the same thing. We're not alone. We're not picked out for special treatment. The measures your Rector and Wardens are working on are very similar to every parish in our Diocese, in our Nation, across the Anglican Communion and among each denomination. It can make us feel insignificant and forgotten but we're not. It all depends on how you look at it.

All our reading today are, in one sense or another to do with sight and, strongly in our Gospel, blindness. They're incredibly important and relevant at this time because, if we're to survive, as individuals, as families, as communities, as Church, we're going to need to find our where are points of blindness are and open our eyes to see from different points of view. Our lengthy gospel shows us how easy it is to be blind to what is happening around us, especially if it's not what we want to see.

The Pharisees call the man who was healed not once but twice after grilling his parents in between his examinations. He answers them quite opening and simply but because he doesn't say what they want to hear and won't agree with their point of view, they end up ridiculing him and expelling him from the synagogue. As someone of them later are one the fringes of Jesus lesson on sight and blindness, they wonder aloud if he is speaking about them, while the manner of their question proves it is actually a statement. He CAN'T be talking about us! But because you say you see, Jesus tells them, your sin remains. They can't see that Jesus' act of healing is a good thing, a gift from God; all they can see is that he broke the Sabbath rule.

Remember Jesus in Mark chapter 2 declares "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" it's to give us time to rest, relax, reflect, to pray, be with family, really listen to what God might be trying to tell us.

Listen to this poem Pandemic by Lyn Ungar:

What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath - The most sacred of times?

Cease from travel; cease from buying and selling; give up, just for now, on trying to make the world different than it is

Sing. Pray. Touch only those to whom you commit your life.

Centre down. And when you body has become still, reach out with your heart

Know that we are connected in ways that are terrifying and beautiful. (you could hardly deny it now)

Know that our lives are in one another's hands. (surely, that has come clear)

Do not reach out your hands. Reach out your heart. Reach out your words

Reach out all the tendrils of compassion that move, invisibly, where we cannot touch

Promise this world your love - for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, so long as we all shall live.

Think of times when you have been so wedded to a particular point of view that you are completely unable to accept that there might be other ways of looking at a situation. Look at the greed and fear generated by the virus but also the misunderstanding that cause three women to shriek and swear and come to blows; the picture of a man's smug, gloating face as he manages to fill his trolley to overflowing, leaving behind him obvious need that could be eased by a little compassion and fairness. Is this who we've become? We've seen a sad and ugly side of people but it's not the only side, as Brother Richard Hendrick, a Capuchin Franciscan living in Ireland, in his poem "Lockdown" reminds us: All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting

All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way

All over the world people are waking up to a new reality

To how big we really are. To how little control we really have. To what really matters. To Love.

So we pray and we remember that Yes there is fear. But there does not have to be hate.

Yes there is isolation. But there does not have to be loneliness.

Yes there is panic buying. But there does not have to be meanness.

Yes there is sickness. But there does not have to be disease of the soul

Yes there is even death. But there can always be a rebirth of love.

We've heard news that the canals in Venice, devoid of the massive tourist trade are becoming clear, clean and a haven for fish once more. In Wuhan, China, where the virus originated, after a few weeks of lock-down the terrible pollution is gradually dispersing. Skies are showing clearly through the clouds and bird song can again be heard. In Italy, where the virus has taken such a terrifying toll, they open windows and sing and play instrument with one another.

For some, perhaps many, we may feel that we are walking, as the writer of Psalm 23 terms it, "through the valley of the shadow of death" but we do not walk through it alone while; in our reading from Samuel we find the prophet dealing with a different point of view to his God as he seeks to anoint a new king. Thankfully Samuel is smart enough to keep himself tuned in to the still small voice of God, as he is presented with the sons of Jesse and sees that God has chosen the most unlikely of Jesse's boy to lead the nation but, naturally, the best one.

The author of Ephesians equates true sight to light and calls us to truly see and shine the light of Christ into the world. Maybe, in the strange and unsettling times, we are being offered a time to slow down and smell the proverbial roses. Slow down and reach out in new and different ways to one another. Slow down and take time to tune into that still, small voice that the prophets heard and acted on.

Today is Mothering Sunday, which was traditionally a time when those working away from home were encouraged to attend their mother church and, as it was practical, their mothers. Let us recognise and draw strength from our loved ones, whether near by or far away. Let us draw strength and find new ways to be church, to be community in amidst the stillness. Help us to see light and love in the days ahead, to find serenity and peace.

I'm not trying to be a sunny eyed but blinkered optimist but I am trying to listen to the voice of our Creator when I'm perhaps beginning to stress about the future. We cannot know what changes may lie ahead but, with our faith in God and by finding new ways to uplift and enrich ourselves and others, spiritually and emotionally, perhaps we can start to focus on what we might have to learn and come to know ourselves, our neighbours and our God in deeper, more compassionate and loving ways.

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.