

St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday 25 February 2018 Pride Festival

Readings for the Gathering

Romans 4 Living Bible (The Living Bible)

4¹⁻² Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What were his experiences concerning this question of being saved by faith? Was it because of his good deeds that God accepted him? If so, then he would have something to boast about. But from God's point of view Abraham had no basis at all for pride. ³ For the Scriptures tell us Abraham *believed God*, and that is why God ... declared him "not guilty." ⁴⁻⁵ But didn't he earn his right to heaven by all the good things he did? No, for being saved is a gift; if a person could earn it by being good, then it wouldn't be free—but it is! It is *given* to those who do *not* work for it. For God declares sinners to be good if they have faith in Christ to save them from God' ... ⁹ Now then, the question: Is this blessing given only to those who have faith in Christ but also keep the Jewish laws, or is the blessing also given to those who do not keep the Jewish rules but only trust in Christ? Well, what about Abraham? We say that he received these blessings through his faith. Was it by faith alone, or because he also kept the Jewish rules? ¹⁰ For the answer to that question, answer this one: *When* did God give this blessing to Abraham? **It was before he became a Jew—before he went through the Jewish initiation ceremony of circumcision.** ¹¹ It wasn't until later on, *after* God had promised to bless him *because of his faith*, that he was circumcised. The circumcision ceremony was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him just and good in his sight—before the ceremony took place. So Abraham is the spiritual father of those who believe and are saved without obeying Jewish laws.

Mark 8:31-38 Living Bible (The Living Bible)

³¹ Then Jesus began to tell them about the terrible things he would suffer, and that he would be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the other Jewish leaders—and be killed, and that he would rise again three days afterwards. ³² He talked about it quite frankly with them, so Peter took him aside and chided him. "You shouldn't say things like that," he told Jesus. ³³ Jesus turned and looked at his disciples and then said to Peter very sternly, "Satan, get behind me! You are looking at this only from a human point of view and not from God's." ³⁴ Then he called his disciples and the crowds to come over and listen. "If any of you wants to be my follower," he told them, "you must put aside your own pleasures and shoulder your cross, and follow me closely. ³⁵ If you insist on saving your life, you will lose it. Only those who throw away their lives for my sake and for the sake of the Good News will ever know what it means to really live. ³⁶ "And how does a man benefit if he gains the whole world and loses his soul in the process? ³⁷ For is anything worth more than his soul?"

Contemporary Reading

'Why I support Gay Marriage' Interview with Tony Campolo
<https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Tony-Campolo-Why-gay-Christians-should-be-fully-accepted-into-the-Church>

I know all the arguments pro and con. I've thought of everything, and I'm still open to considering new things when somebody has something new to say. Having said all of that, I just meet too many wonderful Christian people who are in gay relationships, and I know this: my own marriage has been an incredible relationship. If I was to ask what has been the greatest influence in nurturing me as a Christian, I would have to say it's my wife. I then ask myself a very simple question: can I deny homosexual couples what I am personally experiencing in the way of blessings and joy in a relationship?

That became the basis for my final decision. I just knew too many couples who were living out the Christian life, who were committed to the work of the kingdom and who were in edifying relationships.

Suicide is the second major cause of death among teenagers in America, second only to automobile accidents. Almost three-quarters of those suicides are suicides by Christian young people who cannot reconcile their sexual orientation with what they're hearing from the pulpit. I don't know what the Church is about, but if it's about driving kids to suicide it's not doing the right thing

The Reflection.

We've talked about why we might go on a spiritual journey two weeks ago. Then we talked about what we need to pack for that journey. Today I want to expand on who makes the journey. Recently I've been reflecting on the horrible tendency of our churches to exclude people who are 'other' than what some consider the 'norm'. IN Pride Festival time obviously my thoughts focused on the otherness of heterosexuality and gayness and the complexities of gender identities. One reaction to resist that, is for the whole 'religious/spirituality' thing to be softened and sanitised. We make it all about Looove and acceptance and 'don't worry about what that nasty old Bible says'.

And I have reflected that when I feel someone is rejecting *me*, it is not enough to be accepted by others whom I know are in my favour. I still wish that the original harsh rejector of my personhood could like me. Theirs is the acceptance I crave. So I pondered, if God has this popular and long standing reputation as harsh and nasty and judgmental, I might not want a kind of Disney-version-God to accept me, that would be too easy. I crave the acceptance of that old hoary judge on the throne of heaven.

I know today's Bible readings may have sounded strange to your ears therefore, if you have been hanging around the Disney style, 'keep it light' version of Christianity/Spirituality. But I think these two readings tell us that even that traditional God who is often portrayed as *very* finickity about who is 'in' and who is 'out', has a wide, broad view.

In the first reading the author, Paul, was writing to the new Jesus followers who lived in Rome – a mix of Jews turned Jesus followers and non-Jews who were picking up on the Jesus Way. There have obviously been arguments in the Roman community about who is 'in' and who is 'out', and what you need to do or be to be accepted by God. Do you have to first be a true son or daughter of Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith before being an OK follower of Jesus? Or, can you be accepted by this same God without the Jewish credential of circumcision. (you notice we are just dealing with male members of society here – presumably women had other problems being accepted but they are not dealt with here.)

Paul, who claims elsewhere to be the most 'Jewish of Jews' says something very surprising in reaction to these arguments. He points out that way, way back, millennia before, it was just Abraham and God. It was just Abraham and the call he felt came from God to move his family and livestock and household, lock, stock and nephew Lot from Haran high up there in Turkey to Israel. A huge journey especially on foot.

All Abraham did was follow that call deep inside him. As Paul puts it elsewhere in this chapter, at the time, there were no Jewish rules to follow! No ten commandments, no Leviticus (wouldn't *that* be nice!), no Deuteronomy telling you what to do with your harvest, no precise Passover instructions to follow. It was just Abraham, his God and trackless desert. Abe then, was accepted by God says Paul, because he trusted. Abraham. Was. Accepted. On. Trust.

Can we believe this? No confession of faith to subscribe to, no promises to make, no doctrine to learn, no tests of sexual orientation or gender identity. Just. Trust. Often we get hung up on whether or not we believe. We get confused about or whether or not we have faith, especially enough faith or the right kind of faith. Here Paul is saying it is just important to trust the journey and the voice that calls

you on it. (Quite a difficult thing I might add, for post- enlightenment people who are often hung up on doctrinal propositions and statements of faith in their various religious frameworks)

'Just' trusting of course is both sublimely simple and incredible demanding at the same time. Trusting is precious and uncomplicated and widely accepting all at the same time as being the hardest thing you might even have done in your life.

As David Griebner says in his parable *The Carpenter and the Unbuilder*:

"The important thing was simply to continue to put one foot in front of the other with love and trust."

Journeying and acceptance *is* profoundly simple. To be genuine, it also needs to be incredibly demanding. Peter, in the Gospel reading, fell into the trap we can sometimes fall into – the "keep-it-light" class of spiritual walkers. Jesus is being frank and honest about his premonition of how bad it was going to be for him when they got to Jerusalem. You didn't need to be supernatural to know that for Jesus to journey to Jerusalem at that particular time was the act of a lunatic. Peter is hating this portrayal of what could and, if Jesus is to be believed here, *would* happen. So he protests. He wants Jesus to stop talking in such a morbid fashion. Only, he is rocked back on his heels and called 'Satan' by his beloved Teacher. What ?!!!

Jesus is suggesting strongly that seducing ourselves or others into taking the soft option is wrong, even, we could say, we would be doing something *evil* to our friend or colleague or newcomer to church. And that even if we were thinking to be kind and welcoming and accepting of anything and everything.

Members of the lgbtqi communities know that their journey in an often hostile world is hard; that there are phases of it you cannot miss out though you would like to. Acceptance and getting on to the journey is both simple *and* difficult.

Sometimes when the way is tough on our spiritual journeys, we can forget that we were simply accepted in the beginning without any credentials, without any good works or having to sign up to anything. We can mistake the difficulties we are facing for our own failures or for others' rejection. No, it is simply hard work. Incredibly rewarding, but hard work.

There is a kind of 'hard' like that, but there is also the *evil* kind of hard. Hard like the trend Tony Campolo rages about in the contemporary reading.

People in and outside churches who drive young people to suicide are dangerous people, like Peter. They are dangerous because they have not done their *own* hard work. That work is to learn to deal with their feelings towards others different from them. *They* are the deficient ones, not the rainbow people they are rejecting. They are unconscious of what they are doing. Jesus put it well on Good Friday when he asked for forgiveness for his persecutors because "they know not what they do".

This reading from Tony Campolo is startling because it is from Tony Campolo. Campolo is a well known evangelical speaker and writer in the States. Later in this same interview, he grieves that in changing his mind about rainbow issues, he has lost his former evangelical community. For them, the circle of rejects has grown from not only the gay community but also those who support them. Such is the blinkeredness of people who have not looked deeply within at their own phobias.

Jesus calls Peter to account for this; he calls us to account too.

We are accepted on trust onto the journey; but our journey will only be deep and true if we carry the cross we are *personally* meant to unpack and decipher and integrate into our lives.

For some, that cross is phobias about difference. For some the cross is our fear of rejection. For others our cross is our suspicion of religion and spirituality. There are many more crosses individuals have to encounter for themselves. What might your particular cross be this Lent?

This is all complex and deep and hard to explain. I hope I have managed to shed some light on its complexity, but also, part of this simple but difficult journey is working this out for yourself.

In the meantime, let's continue to accept each other on trust and let's put one foot in front of the other in love.

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 minister@standrews.org.nz