**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Readings Sunday 6 October Pentecost 17**

**Theological Education and Reflection: Thinking about what we feel**

**Readings for the Gathering**

**Hebrew Bible Deuteronomy 6: 1-9**

6 These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, 2 so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. 3 Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you. 4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

**Gospel Matthew 22: 34-45**

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” 37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”41 While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, 42 “What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” “The son of David,” they replied. 43 He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, 44 “‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ 45 If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” 46 No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

**Contemporary reading ‘A letter to friends of Emergent…’** by Brian McLaren

https://brianmclaren.net/a-letter-to-friends-of-emergent/

“Emergent refers to Emergent Village “a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” There won’t be postmodern churches (or better put, churches that deeply engage with postmodern cultures) until there are Christian theologies that are not written/spoken in modern-ese. Post-modern-ese theologies may have been conceived; they may be in the second week of prenatal development; but as far as I can tell, none have yet been born. These things take time, and premature births are risky. It’s better to let the womb of the Spirit take proper time to give birth what must come in the fulness of time. Predictably, those trying to be midwives to these new theologies (note the plural) are being criticized as heretics, unorthodox, disturbers of the peace, etc. This is inevitable, and this is an opportunity for humility and gentleness and meekness (reviled, not reviling back) on their part, these virtues being ideal contexts in which things of the Spirit can gestate. We should pray for all who are involved in this labour. And we should pray for all those attacking the midwives. And we should be patient too, with everyone… /The emergent movement (a dangerous term – see next paragraph) has wonderful promise, but it could just become another marketing gimmick to sell books, build egos, and bolster sagging spirits with a new invisible wardrobe for a pudgy, pasty old emperor. No doubt, in some quarters it will squander its potential, but if you care about the possibilities being actualized … please … let’s aim deep and high…. /If you’re coming to one of the emergent conventions this spring, I hope you’ll help us set a tone of depth, sincerity, good cheer, good humour, optimism, faith, humility, cordiality, friendship, and fun. Try to leave your toxicity at home. Deconstruction is important, and there’s a time and place for it … but there is a time for constructive conversations too, and this is such a time. Come trusting God to do something impossible … namely, to help us rise high above (or dig deep beneath) the superficiality which characterizes most of our culture, secular and religious … Praying that this will be so – Brian

**Reflection for the Gathering**

It was an interesting experience looking for the contemporary reading this week. Prior to my entering ministry training and during it, theologians’ top goal was to write their systematic theology. It was systematic because it systematically went through the major topics – God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the Church, the Life and Work of Jesus Christ, Salvation etc. etc.

They were weighty tomes, often running to several volumes. Yet this week when I was seeking a contemporary comment on theology I was looking through websites well equipped with podcasts, video clips and blogs, most each of them no more than a lengthy sound-byte. Twenty minutes of Tedtalk or perhaps an hour’s lecture at a seminar. I noticed too that the word ‘theology’ was less in evidence than the words ‘spirituality’ or ‘missional’ or ‘context’.

This reflects the different way people do theology and communicate it. Theology is more of a verb, an event created in the passage from reflection to action. This is just as the cycle of theological reflection on the front of the order of service shows.

The starting point in this cycle for many is the reflection on our experience of the world seen in this cycle at the top. This will be different from one context to another. The experience of a woman is different from that of the black community, the experience of the poor is different from those who live in the margin between one race and another like Asian-Americans or Syrian-New Zealanders.

So our theologising now is more often responding to our context. It is the experience which takes centre stage.

But experience along does not bring us to understanding. Sometimes Theology has been described as Faith seeking Understanding. So, we move on to analysing our experience to see what it holds within – on the right hand side of the cycle. This can be done in a split second as a metaphor springs to mind quickly or it can be a slower, more thorough process – it depends on your situation.

And after that analysis, we might turn to the biblical tradition and the wisdom of the church – the stage at the bottom of the cycle. We bring together the depths of our experience with the depths of that tradition and let them talk with each other

We might compare the isolation of migrant women with Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well; we might, as we have heard today in the readings, compare our theologising with the masterly summary of the commandments in Deuteronomy which Jesus used when being grilled by theologising Pharisees. In what ways in your week this week did you express you love for God and your love for yourself when you dealt with other people?

Did you notice that too, that Jesus’ statement as translated here in the Gospel passage included the mind? We are to love God he says with, amongst other qualities, with our mind. Following the Jesus Way is not only an affective, emotional, justice filled choice, but an intellectual enquiry also. Do not leave your brains at the church door, bring them in with you. Apply those brains to this fascinating intersection of your experience in all its colour and intensity with the equally deep richness of the biblical and theological tradition.

Both our experience and our theologising reflections are of little use however, if they are not followed by informed action “So as to bring about change for the better” it says on the cycle. It is important, that St Andrew’s, as it pursues its social action in the world, has it undergirded by previous experience, analysis of that experience engagement with biblical and theological tradition. The second sentence in the Pillar written on the front of the order of service describes this process succinctly.

“Expressing faith in ways that connect to the diverse context in Aotearoa in the 21st century”. This takes us far and wide. Images drawn from a southern hemisphere, for example. Theology suitable for a country where woman can take the lead. Hymns which take into account recent scientific discoveries. Liturgy which names us in this place. Art which picks up metaphors from the streets on which we walk.

Advocating a theological ethic that empowers people to live sustainably on planet earth” means that we need to do things as basic are separating our recycling, making wise decision about how we serve food, dispose of rubbish, keep our brunches plastic free.

And if that were not enough eggs in our theological basket, we link with progressive Christianity world wide and keep in touch with inter faith action here and in New Zealand.

The methods we use to do all that besides this Gathering in this church are through the Exploring faith Study group, in Spirited Conversations, during Rainbow Room time with the children and through the St Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion and Society.

The Pillar also mentions the 21st century. One of its realities is the changing way communication happens, to cell phones and facebook and twitter. Also, the changing method of portraying the drama and the realities of our lives, from the cinemas of the 1930s to television and on into the digital scene and binge-watching of movies and series through streaming services.

Our theologising for the era in which we are now and the immediate future is not yet done. As Brian McLaren put it in the contemporary reading: “Post-modern-ese theologies may have been conceived; they may be in the second week of prenatal development; but as far as I can tell, none have yet been born” Another writer calls the present moment “post- secular,” arguing that psychologists and philosophers are admitting now that we have miscalculated in our attempt to become totally secular and that the sacred is still of ultimate concern, it simply will not go away.

So let me try my latest theological metaphor on you all. Some of you have heard it from me personally.

Imagine the Spirit lying beneath the ground on which we stand like an aquifer of water lies beneath the earth. Then imagine it bursting forth at different points of our world’s history like an artesian well or a fountain or a spring.

Now the Spirit is not water, it is invisible. This made me think of the movie “Hollow Man” in which Kevin Bacon is a scientist who takes an elixir which renders him invisible. He has to clothe his invisible body so people can see him – including this latex mask.

But, he goes rogue and the elixir goes bad and he becomes permanently impossible to see. The film had a clever special effect where you could see the indentation of his body on the bed, but not the body making the indentation.

So think of the invisible Spirit bursting into the world like an artesian well. Just like the invisible, man we cannot see it, so we have clothed the Spirit in different ways – through church buildings, images of the cross, clerical robes and other church decorations. We have also clothed the spirit in theology, creeds and regulations. Our mistake is that sometimes we have come to worship the clothing rather than reverencing the Spirit of Life within that clothing.

Which would you rather have, the theology which describes the Spirit or the experience of the Spirit herself?

Religions crumble when the decorations and the clothing and the descriptions lose touch with changing contexts and with people’s experience.

When the religious experience ceases to be spiritual like a flowing stream or like the gentleness of air on which a feather can float, then people turn away from it. This is the phenomenon we are seeing in stark view right now. The release of the latest religion census figures shows us that those with no religion are no greater in numbers than those following the largest religious group in New Zealand, Christianity.

One way we can see this trend being reversed is through our practice of communion. At the end of the 19th and into the 20th century, the Presbyterian church “fenced the table”. This mean that elders visited members before the quarterly communion and examined them to see if they were worthy to receive communion. If they were satisfied, they gave the member a token which they were to hand in when they attended the communion service. This one is from St Andrew’s Church in Dunedin you could buy it now on Trademe for $40. It’s not dated but this would have to have been in circulation several years later than 1848. These three are from Scotland – one is dated 1824 and another 1854. You may not be able to see that the reverse of the oval shaped token on the top left says “This do in remembrance of Me” and “But let a man examine himself” following the scriptural injunction that we come well prepared to the table having sorted out our differences with any one who might be at the table with us.

During the 20th century this system changed to communion cards, (Minus the associated examination by the elders).

In this century, we now include “all those who gather round Jesus Christ” and we sing “draw the circle wide, draw it wider still” and this circle which is rainbow coloured – indicates that every shade and hue of person is welcome here. Let us continue to be midwives of the post-modern-ese and post-secular theologies which we desperately need.

So may it be.

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