

St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday 20 October 2019 Pentecost 19 Faith in Action/Care of Resources

Readings for the Gathering

Epistle

Faith and Deeds

James 2: 14-26

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless^[d]? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,"^[e] and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Contemporary reading

From "Compassion not Sacrifice"

by Richard Rohr

<https://cac.org/compassion-not-sacrifice-2019-07-10/>

The spirit of goodness, rightness, beauty, and aliveness, Jesus said, is always moving. Like wind, like breath, like water, the Spirit is in motion, inviting us to enter the current and flow.

The problem is that we often stop moving. We resist the flow. We get stuck. The word institution itself means something that stands rather than moves. When our institutions lack movements to propel them forward, the Spirit, I believe, simply moves around them, like a current around a rock in a stream. But when the priestly/institutional and prophetic/movement impulses work together, institutions provide stability and continuity and movements provide direction and dynamism. Like skeleton and muscles, the two are meant to work together.

For that to happen, we need a common spirituality to infuse both our priestly/institutional- and our prophetic/movement-oriented wings. The spirituality will often be derived from the mystical/poetic/contemplative streams within our tradition. Without that shared spirituality, without that soul work that opens our deepest selves to God and grounds our souls in love, no movement will succeed and no institution will stand. . . . It's the linking of action and contemplation, great work and deep spirituality, that keeps the goodness, rightness, beauty, and aliveness flowing.

Pillars under reflection are:

St Andrew's Pillars:

Faith in Action

St Andrew's expresses its faith commitments in social justice and service. St Andrew's life is marked by an awareness of and commitment to global peace and justice, including economic and environmental justice. We will work to make a difference nationally and in the local community in connecting diverse communities and promoting social cohesion and reconciliation. We are committed to sustainability through care of the environment; care for people and places.

Care of resources

St Andrew's Centre provides a place of welcome for all people; an accessible and affordable meeting place in the city for a range of groups and a sustainable income for the community. We will foster a culture of generous giving. The operational finances of St Andrew's will be sound and meet accepted accounting practice standards. The structures and processes of the church will be efficient and effective in responding to needs and opportunities. We will be responsible and caring employers of the people who work at St Andrew's including being a Living Wage employer.

Reflection for the Gathering

If I wasn't sure retiring was a good thing, little incidents recently have confirmed it *is* a good thing. I've been forgetting things and miscalculating and forgetting quite a lot recently. Time to give the brain a bit of a rest, I think. One recent miscalculation was leaving the sixth Pillar off the list of reflections. "Care of Resources". I had already advertised another look at faith in Action, so to attempt to be true to both, I have combined them today.

The two are linked in our basic approach to religion, spirituality and life. Both the faith-in-action pillar and the care-of-resources pillar are concerned with our outer life. – How and what we do about our faith convictions in the real world and how we work with money and property and other resources we have. The outside world watches what we do with our money and where we come down on social justice issues. When they see a mis-match, they let us know about our hypocrisy in no uncertain terms. Whatever Parish Council worked on the strategic plan that led to these pillars, these two pillars particularly describe aspirations about including deeds as well as faith in our lives (specifically in the life of this community), and that Council had a firm idea about some specifics, including as you see on the front cover of the order of service, accounting practices. Both our behaviours with money and property and employment practices and our behaviours about social justice and service, need to be outward commitment as evidence of inner values and deep interior commitments.

I don't know if you have seen an advertisement for batteries by some company with a toy bunny that keeps on drumming his drum while other toys run out of battery power and stop their motion? I think of what goes on in this Sunday Gathering and in your private spiritual practice at home as 'battery activity'. Both here and there we recharge our batteries by paying attention to the inner life. We nurture our souls, that spiritual inner core of us. We pay attention in those quiet moments to what needs to be or become the mainspring of all our activity and movement. We do that in different ways. At the cluster group meeting last night several people said they loved gardening. I suspect a lot of battery re charging goes on among the vegetables and flowers, for example.

Sometimes I get annoyed that users of the Centre and especially the Church seem to be ignorant of the fact that a living church community meets here on Sunday mornings – and ignorance they show by how they leave the chairs etc all over the place for us to find at 9.30 the next day. Yet this gathering - this group of people – you – are the mainspring of all that happens back there in the Centre. Without the faith and vision of this community, this *faith* community, as I emphasised the other day, the Centre would eventually either grind to a halt or become a purely commercial venture like all the other meeting centres up and down the terrace.

Unless we each, individually, are paying attention to the inner world within us all, then our outer world begins to fall apart. We might continue doing for others, but the heart goes out of it and we gravitate to patronising charity rather than empathetic compassion. The soul shrivels and we lose our creativity, spontaneity and flexibility which helps us meet the right need in the right moment in the right way.

We are not helped in this by the bias shown in the church, especially of course, in Protestantism towards the primary of work and good works. It's either the protestant work ethic that gets you or Catholic guilt and there is not much to choose between them. The word 'Love' somehow seems to have lost its power, and mystery and the sacred have been downgraded in the modern secular world. So, to fill the vacuum we turn to activity – certainly good activity, moral, charitable, just, advocating activity, but the point is, something busy and productive. As I am stating the case for the mainspring of the soul being important, you may be thinking I am advocating non-action in social justice areas of church and society. Not at all the case. That would be to swing to the other pole of the dualism. I guess I am arguing for 'sustainability' in our outward journey. Just as we need food to keep going, just as we need power to make engines work, just as we need sleep to keep alert during the day, we need spiritual health to fuel sustainable social action.

There are many moments when we are left feeling helpless in the face of great need. Many a time I have seen in disasters, people reaching out in order to feel they have done something by donating clothing – you might remember in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, large piles of clothing shown in warehouses, and then the message going out that enough clothing had been brought in, please, no more. The donated clothing itself was becoming part of the disaster! The ache in the givers' hearts was obvious and their gestures were generous, but sometimes to pause and discern the way ahead is the wisest action, not to jump into unreflective action.

Your generous gifts of new world vouchers to Kaikoura Presbyterian Church two years ago hit the spot because we phoned the minister and *asked* how we could help. It was he who reminded me that the local businesses were finding it tough, so if there was a way we could help by helping Kaikourians to support a local business that would be the best way. Sometimes aid can meet an immediate need, but is not helpful to all on the ground. That is just one example where having the inner stillness to wait, to ask, to be guided by the other as to what is most appropriate or most wanted, is important. I sometimes wonder if, since Christian faith has taken such a beating at the hands of modern sceptics, whether Christian people feel that the most defensible and rational seeming thing they can do is to manage and act, to give and help. Sometimes, not always but sometimes, we may be best to do nothing in the light of an individual's seemingly desperate need because what they need to do is to learn to help themselves, or to wrestle their own way through the dark night on their own, albeit with you as a companion by their side, knowing they are not alone. At other times, the need is indeed to speak and speak out, to march and protest, to make submissions and asking the difficult questions, to give until it hurts us, to pledge help for the future. Telling the difference requires discernment fuelled by inner wisdom and informed by quiet listening.

Under the Care of Resources pillar, we have a particular responsibility here on The Terrace with this complex of buildings which we care for on behalf of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. We benefit from the cachet of beginning in this visible position on The Terrace and from the beauty and heritage of the building. It carries with it however, great cost. It requires much and constant effort to maintain, particularly when we want to innovate, like adding disability access to the front of the building. The bureaucracy we have encountered for that project is unbelievable. We are indebted to the hard work and many meetings with Council and Heritage officials which Finance and Facilities Management Group members have endured. As you know, that same group have worked out the minimum reserves we need to hold in case of disaster, showing both a prudent approach and also a realisation that the 'rainy day' we were saving for is here now. Holding money in reserve unnecessarily would be counterproductive. You don't come to that conclusion unless you have a robust spirituality driving that kind of decision.

The spiritual base of which I talk is not the medieval piety of emaciated hermits or reclusive religious orders – strong though their spirituality was in their times. It is a spiritual base which is available to everyone, this 'post-secular sacred' as it is being called. Ancient mystics said this hundreds of years

ago, Theresa of Avila, Evelyn Underhill, Meister Eckhart. As another writer puts it: "All these ancient practices are coming down to earth, down to ordinary folk and everyday experience, but in different ways." The beginning of a *Lectio Divina* group and the continuation of centering prayer here at St Andrew's are both cases in point. It may seem strange that in dealing with these two more practically outworking pillars I am emphasising the inner life. But the outward activity is easy to do and easy to grasp on to. It is also supported by our society with praise and accolades. The inner life is not so rewarded and it requires more advocacy as a result. David Tacey writes:

Many of us realise that what we call 'spirituality' has limitations: it can be about seeking, doing, questing. This can become exhausting and run out of energy. Many of us seek but do not find, and why? Because to find we have to allow ourselves to be found. The mystery that searches for us has to be admitted into our lives, we have to allow ourselves to be penetrated by its love, beauty and terror. Why terror? Because when something truly Other outside the will, seeks to connect with us, we have to renounce control and allow ourselves to be taken. There is an old saying "Let, go, let God," and this is the secret of mystical experience. The essence of meditation is to be taken into a will which is not one's own, and yet, paradoxically, the basis of one's true identity.

That's a sobering paragraph because it gives a hint of the courage it takes to follow the road less travelled.

I remember reading of a university theology professor in Chicago who volunteered at a home where prostitutes were given shelter and rehabilitation with a view to them leaving their professions and finding other work. The Director read his long CV in silence. Then she looked up and said – so you like cooking? (He had listed his interest in international cuisine under 'hobbies' at the end of his lengthy academic resume. The professor found himself assigned to cooking a special meal each Thursday night for the residents. Slowly, the women got to know him. He was very thrilled after some months to be asked to lead them through a reflective time on some special occasion. The director explained that the women in the home were not used to a man doing anything for them without strings. They were not used to a relationship with a man which is not based on money being exchanged. The book in which this story was told was arguing against 'theological tourism' – where the privileged visit the underprivileged then go home again. This professor found himself in place for the long haul. The story for me shows the inner life of the Director of that home was alive and well, and that if his inner life wasn't quite up to it at the beginning, the professor's inner life was catching up. He was prepared to take up the challenge to be himself rather than his academic persona and to allow the Other to find him. Our ego-based society doesn't prepare us for these moments, so here in the church we must prepare ourselves and others to be ready for them.

The scripture reading contrasts two people whose acted one by being prepared to sacrifice his son – a story we shrink from today but which represents in symbolic form Abraham's willingness to lay his future on the line - and Rahab a foreigner and prostitute – not naturally as high on the list of legendary heroes as Abraham, but instrumental in the Hebrew narrative as helping the advance of the people into Canaan. She, you will remember, is one of the five women named in the genealogy of Matthew's Gospel, and ended up being if the genealogy is to be believed she became the great-great grandmother of the famous King David, national hero and icon. These two people as different from each other as two people could be, each are praised in this passage for taking action – in both cases very, very risky action because they trusted God and the process of their journeys.

When I was a child, the translation we used for this passage was "faith without works is dead". It was a phrase my mother used when she needed the coal buckets filled or the dishes done. It was used in jest, but the phrase is telling. 'Faith without works' is dead and we can also remind ourselves today that 'works without faith' may be equally lifeless.