

SERMON 15 JANUARY 2023

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Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? We don't talk about sin much here at St. Andrew's do we. What are the alternatives to the word sin? Crime, offence, misdeed, misdemeanour, error, lapse. The verb is to transgress, do wrong, misbehave, go astray. Why don't progressive churches like to use the word sin?

There are some who say that liberal/progressive churches don't believe in sin. That we never talk about it or call people to confess. It is the "s" word that is never mentioned. We know it is not as simple as breaking one of the 10 commandments we learnt at Sunday School. We realise there is evil in the world and we intuitively feel that we sometimes add to that but we don't always know how to stop it. If we don't know what sin is it becomes more difficult to figure out what authentic forgiveness and reconciliation means and how to reach it.

Who am I, I don't suppose you really know who I am? Do you really know the person in the next row from you? We come to church we go through the worship service and join in a cup of coffee afterwards. Who am I, I am the daughter of Viola and Faasiu Taulealeausumai I have 3 brothers and 2 sisters. I am part of a very big extended family. I enjoy music especially playing the guitar, the piano, singing, I love going to café's, I like spending a lot of time on my own too. I am a deep thinker and really enjoy a theological debate and intellectually stimulating conversation....

How many sides are there to your identity. What are our shadow sides that we don't like people to know about, what are the parts of us that we

keep private and hidden from everyone else. How balanced are we in our daily living with the things we do for others and the things we do for ourselves? Some people can get by in life by living totally altruistically for others and not even know what their own needs are, in fact the idea of individualism is such a foreign concept. Whereas others can live totally for themselves without any thought for another. Are we somewhere in between or a bit of both. There is no right or wrong, because we are all unique and different.

Sometimes we can use our own experiences to try and help others out, but at the end of the day, our experience is our experience and those to whom we think we are being helpful need to experience what is going on in their lives often on their own and without our help. The depth of experience builds the foundations of our being, solidifies the core of our identity. We cannot save people from death or grief or hardship, we can journey with them and be with them, but we cannot take away the pain or the sorrow, we know it hurts and we want to save people from this, but the reality is we can't. It is important that everyone gets to journey these roads less travelled and experience for themselves the depth of resources that they have built up within themselves, their resilience, their vulnerability, their faith in God and faith in humanity.

Throughout the living of our lives, our identity continues to develop. Our core self identity is shaped in relationship with others. Who we are grows and changes as we come to integrate and re-integrate the experiences and relationships we know at each age and stage of our lives. Identity is alive, in process shaping who we are becoming.

As people of faith the most important relationship that shapes each one of us is the relationship we have with God, with Jesus, with this church as our faith community and with the world in which we live out our faith.

Where each one of us is at spiritually may not be the same. Some of you may have such an awesome spirituality that perhaps you should be preaching and I should be listening. Some of you have grown up with the bible from the day of your birth and have probably memorised at least half of the famous biblical verses. Have any of you read the bible from Genesis through to revelation from cover to cover? Each one of us has a unique identity formation and a unique spiritual formation. Our churches are filled with people whose identity and spiritual formation processes are unique. In health or sickness, we may well be asking ourselves, “What does faith in God and Jesus Christ have to do with me in the here and now? “Where is God in the celebrations, joy and thanksgivings in the lives of the people we serve?

In the Gospel of John there is always a lot happening with multiple meanings and layers of interpretation. But out of the complexity emerges a clear theme. It is in this Jesus that we encounter the being of God in invitation to us to belong. That belonging is not something static but a relationship with an agenda: ‘that they might have life and have it in abundance’. It is about confronting, disempowering the negativity that we call sin of the world. ‘The sin’ by definition is what destroys life and relationship. When we let that note linger, we can hear through it not only the cries of the human heart but also the cries of all humanity in the pain of violence, injustice and evil.

John's gospel is like that: giving us key central themes of life and light, death and darkness, but we have to unpack them if they are not to remain remote and abstract.

In this passage we explore how the writer of John's gospel relates the story of Jesus' baptism as seen through the eyes of John the Baptist. Among the many names for Jesus that appear in this text and serve to reveal something of Jesus' call and mission, the testimony of John the Baptist declares Jesus to be the Son of God, and the one in whom God's Spirit dwells.

John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus as the Lamb of God, one who redeems or saves. This use of the image of the lamb would have resonated with history for those followers of Jesus who were familiar with Hebrew Scriptures. In the stories of the Exodus, a lamb serves as a symbol of God's deliverance. To avoid the plague that would kill the first-born child in each Egyptian family, the Israelites were instructed to mark their doorposts with lamb's blood. The lamb was also the animal that priests were to sacrifice annually as a symbol of God's redemption of Israel. With the death of the lamb, the sins of the people would be absolved for that year. In John's gospel, Jesus is crucified on the afternoon before Passover, as the paschal lambs were being slain. John's gospel uses this title only twice, in 1:29 and 1:36.

John the Baptist makes a remarkable announcement: Jesus is more than the mark of a new Exodus – a new saving – for the children of God. John reveals Jesus as the one who “will take away the sin of the world.”

When two curious disciples begin to follow Jesus, Jesus turns to them and meets them where they are. These two disciples respond to Jesus'

invitation to “come and see.” They follow Jesus and stay with him. Andrew, one of these disciples, names Jesus as the Messiah as he invites his brother to “come and see.” Early on in this gospel, Jesus’ identity is clear. He doesn’t proselytise, push, manipulate, control, judge or punish. Instead he engages them, asking a question that gets to the heart of our human experience: “What...” Jesus asks, “are you looking for?” Encouraged by his approachability, his humanness, his openness, Andrew and his friend decide to follow Jesus a little bit farther. So they ask Jesus a question: “Where are you staying?” A give and take relationship is begun. Jesus responds to them again, “Come and see.” The new disciples do go and do see, and they end up staying with Jesus all day – and then for the rest of Jesus ministry.

Stay, Remain. These are crucial words in the Gospel of John. They have the same root as the word “abide”, perhaps the most important word in John’s vocabulary. Abiding, resting, staying, remaining – an intimate togetherness, over time, in the presence of one another’s company. Allowing experience and familiarity and trust to cement a relationship that the mind cannot even fathom. This, my friends is faith. But it begins with curiosity. It is rooted in companionship. It often leads to commitment and conviction, but it all begins with curiosity. Jesus is not only the word become flesh, Jesus is the Way become flesh. Jesus is a journey. Jesus is a journey toward the answer to the most important question of our lives: “What are you looking for?”.

Susan Andrew’s from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. says that to follow Jesus – whether out of curiosity or conviction, is to be a Christian. She says that Christianity is not an idea; it is a lifestyle. Christianity is not a product; it is a process. Christianity is not a routine; it is a relationship.

It is not an individual thing; it is the life of community. All that Jesus asks for in return is our commitment to abide, to stay, to “hang out” with him for a while. God will do the rest.

We are invited to “come and see” and are invited to encourage others also to “come and see what we have found”. To the question “what are you looking for” may we find the appropriate response that leads us to fullness of life for ourselves and one another. This is the Good news of the Christian faith. May it be so, for you and for me. Amen