

Sermon – John 2: 13-22

Lent 3

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight: O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. **Amen.**

Over the last week, Philip, Soraya and I travelled up to Melbourne for three days to attend the *Leading your Church into Growth* Conference. It was a fabulous conference, the best conference I've been to in ages, very motivating and very affirming of the sorts of things that we have been moving towards over the last couple of years: a focus on welcoming and invitation, the relaxing of our liturgy to make it more accessible to people joining us from the community, the move into the children's and families' space. Philip will give you his thoughts about the conference in notices, and this week and next week, I want to use the sermon space to focus on particular aspects covered by the conference.

It's currently Lent, the season of prayer and reflection, so I thought the topic of prayer made great sense, especially as prayer is foundational to growth. You'll notice that we've done a rerun of the Prayer for Growth card that we issued last year. If you still have yours on the fridge at home, or tucked into your bible, just pop the prayer card into the pew shelf in front of you for someone else, on another day. My hope is that this prayer really does become part of the life of our parish, but let's have a look at our scripture first.

Today we are presented with some classic Old Testament text in the form of the Ten Commandments. Whenever we have these types of classic pieces, I like to take the opportunity to remind people of the meta narrative or overarching story of scripture. You see scripture, in the form of the Old Testament and the New Testament, tells the story of a relationship, and like many relationships, it's a tumultuous relationship full of ups and downs. It starts out, in the beginning, with God creating heaven and earth, creating all living things, plants, creatures and of course humans, and so begins this journey of relationship between the creator and the created, between God and humankind. And the Old Testament is full of stories of this evolving

relationship, as humankind learns to live, with varying degrees of success and failure, in covenant or relationship with God. Our Old Testament reading today is another relationship defining text. The people of Israel have been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years and Moses leads them “out of the house of slavery”. They are a miserable, hopeless, complaining people as they wander around the dessert. So, God gives them the Ten Commandments which define how they relate to God and how they relate to each other. And these Ten Commandments form the basis of the Law that the Gospels and New Testament writings refer to. You see the Gospels, the writings about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, bring in another relationship, a new covenant between God and humankind.

Whereas in the Old Testament, we are presented with an awesome, Creator God, in Jesus we are presented with a person, someone with whom we can have a relationship. In Jesus, both truly human and truly divine, we have someone who shares all those human emotions and experiences. For example, in today’s Gospel reading we have Jesus being angry, driving the various merchants out of the Temple, telling them to “Stop making my Father’s house a market-place!” Later in John’s Gospel, he weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus. And on the night before he died, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he becomes distressed and agitated, and says to his Father “for you all things are possible, remove this cup from me.” Jesus understands our pain, our anxiety, our sadness, our anger. Here is truly a God who has journeyed with us, who knows us and the challenges we face daily.

And isn’t this good news? Isn’t this story, a story worth telling? Jesus calls us all to make disciples. At the end of Matthew’s gospel, he famously says to his 11 remaining disciples “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Well, we don’t have to go out to all nations. I think we will be busy enough here in Lara and Little River. You know we are surrounded by people who don’t know Jesus, and we also know that people still have questions about identity, about life and death, and about God.

One of the things that was emphasized at the conference this week, was that nothing happened without prayer. And I know that we have been praying, because things have been happening! We have a growing and happy playgroup, we have families coming to us and making that transition to worship. But we need to keep praying and this prayer that we presented last year is still a great prayer to use in worship, in prayer times and in your own personal reflections. Let's have a closer look at it.

God of Mission,
Who alone brings growth to your Church,
Send your Holy Spirit to give,
Vision to our planning,
Wisdom to our actions,
Joy to our worship
And power to our witness.

I love this first part of the prayer. It reminds me that it is God who brings growth. It's actually not about me, or you. It's God who stirs people's hearts to make that step towards us, whether it's to join our playgroup, or come to church for the first time, or as someone did this week, join a bible study. This is God at work, giving them a curiosity to find out more or develop new relationships. So how do we respond? Again, we respond in the power of the Holy Spirit. We pray that the Holy Spirit gives us vision and wisdom. Vision to see a different world, a world that is ruled by peace and love and healthy relationships, not by fear, evil and dysfunction. We pray for wisdom too. Wisdom to know what to say when those God moments come upon us, as they inevitably do.

We also pray that the Holy Spirit fills our worship with joy. That as we stand here singing, we do so whole heartedly, as we stand here in prayer, we do so with confidence. And we pray that the Holy Spirit gives power to our witness. How many of us, being Anglican, have a tendency to live in the prism of "my faith is my business, and I'm not going to talk about it"? I know I used to be like this: that faith is a private matter, not in the public space.

But Jesus asks us to go and make disciples. He doesn't ask us to sit on our faith. So I pray that the Holy Spirit gives us power to our witness. Yes, that we will witness that Jesus makes a difference in our lives. And this prayer for growth continues.

Help our church to grow in numbers,
In spiritual commitment to you,
And in service to our local community,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer is so good. It puts out what being a disciple is. Remember Jesus came to serve not to be served? And so are we called. We are called to serve our community and each other, just as we did yesterday at *Music in the Park*, providing children's activities for families coming to the event. We are called to deepen our spiritual commitment, to grow in understanding about Jesus, to deepen our relationship with God. Growth isn't just about having more people in the pews, although that would be good. Growth is about all of us and our journey with Jesus, and how it deepens over time with prayer, with study and with service.

I want to end with some more of our Gospel reading today. In response to Jesus getting angry in the Temple, the people ask:

“‘What sign can you show us for doing this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ They then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

This is the message. The transformation Jesus talks about is not only about personal transformation, but about the transformation of the community of faith and the church. This is about a change from worshipping God located in the holiest place, perhaps in the temple, perhaps on top of a mountain, to God who came to us in human form, not confined to a building, but located within the temple of the body of Jesus Christ. This transformation is about worshipping God who suffered, died and was buried, and who on the third day rose again, thereby changing the meaning and the focus of our worship.

Our worship is relational, with a God who understands us to our very core. This is the good news of the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

So, where will you meet Jesus this week? How will you relate to God? Will you meet him in scripture, in the stories of his humanity and his divinity? Or, perhaps you meet Jesus in worship, in the music, the liturgy, in holy communion. Perhaps you meet Jesus in the world outside, in the beauty of creation or in the people you meet and serve, or who serve you. Perhaps you find Jesus in prayer and meditation. In whichever way that you connect with our amazing God, you can be transformed.

Why not make this Lent a time for renewal of your own temple? A time to confront some of the brokenness in your own lives and bring this brokenness to Jesus, who surely knows all about brokenness.

Let us end with the prayer, this time making it personal:

God of Mission,

Who alone brings growth in our lives

Send your Holy Spirit to give,

Vision to our planning,

Wisdom to our actions,

Joy to our worship

And power to our witness.

Help us to grow in spiritual commitment to you,

And in service to our local community,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.